PERFORMANCES IN SWING: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF WOMEN SINGERS OF BIG BANDS, 1930s-1950s

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By Jeanette Hall

Dissertation Committee:

Mari Yoshihara, Chairperson
Elizabeth Colwill
Jonna Eagle
Vernadette V. Gonzalez
Richard C. Rath

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Abstract

Although women singers of big bands from the 1930s to the 1950s claimed the microphone and the spotlight, few were taken seriously as musicians or as key players in American jazz and popular music history. This project—a cultural history—aims to shine a spotlight once again on those singers. My project examines less-known and analyzed women singers—including Helen Humes, Kay Starr, Helen Forrest, Thelma Carpenter, Louise Tobin, and Maxine Sullivan—to understand why and how these women's stories were etched into history in ways that often minimized their contributions, music, and labor. Both the mainstream press and music magazines vigorously debated these singers' authenticity, vocal talent, and ability to connect with a blues and jazz tradition, often crafting predictable narratives about singers' lives and stories. Through intersectional analysis, I demonstrate how big band singers' music performances and performances of identity complicated these predictable narratives by challenging: traditional boundaries of genre (such as categories of jazz, blues, and popular music), the black-white binary present in jazz discourse, acceptable expressions of womanhood and sexuality, and expectations of "private" issues remaining apart from the public realm. My dissertation approaches performance through an interdisciplinary research practice, utilizing cultural studies, sound studies, performances studies, music, and history to understand the social, cultural, and political effects of various performance practices found within women's jazz singing. I also conduct discourse analysis of newspapers, performance reviews, and record reviews in magazines like *Down Beat*, *Billboard,* and *Metronome* to gain insight into how communities received, endorsed, or scrutinized singers. Accounting for big band singers' performances of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, body, and voice allows us to conceptualize their life stories and music differently, showing the power of performances in conveying the

limitations and constructions of societal norms to audiences. These performances highlight the significance of women's gendered labor in contrast to the often reductionist stories told in dominant discourse. This project demonstrates how past music critics worked to maintain jazz as an exclusive, masculine domain in how they wrote about women singers, but also shows how singers both shaped and contested boundaries of jazz and popular music.

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Introduction

Women jazz singers of big bands in the 1930s and 1940s were many, but the stories we hear about them are few. Many women singers of big bands defied traditional categories, labels, and genres, using performance to navigate challenging circumstances. Their stories complicate familiar understandings of jazz and popular music that often simplify and reduce women singers' lives and experiences to narratives that sketch troubled upbringings to immediate success in the spotlight. Singers such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald have become the stand-ins for women's jazz and jazz singing. Focusing on the dominant narratives of these figures serves to erase the numerous other singers who played in similar circuits during their lifetimes. Shifting attention to the stories of the many women big band singers of the Swing Era shows the broad range of female jazz singers' experiences, as well as their contributions. The diverse stories of women singers of big bands illustrate how women used performance as a tool to express and shift identities according to circumstance and to market themselves and their music. Through interviews, autobiographies, and live performances, they helped to craft their own public image.

Women singers of big bands in particular occupied a challenging position in the jazz scene. The mainstream press seldom considered these singers to be genuine jazz musicians and instead viewed them mostly as entertaining complements to the more "serious" male instrumentalists with whom they sang. For example, Velma Middleton, a vocalist who sang with Louis Armstrong's big bands and small groups from 1942 to 1961, is rarely remembered as a figure associated with jazz. Instead, she is most known for her appearance, being described

solely as "a 300-pounder."[1] Other women jazz singers were put on stage with big bands first for their glamorous appearances, and second, for their singing. Singers functioned as spectacles for the audience, as bandleaders sought a token female presence to serve primarily as either "eye candy" or comic relief. For instance, one article in a 1941 issue of *Music and Rhythm* titled "Why Vocalists Go Over Big" highlighted images of female vocalists' appearances, attributing the singers' success to glamour, naiveté, feeling, showmanship, novelty, and romance.[2] "'Girl singer' as eye candy" was commonly reflected in the newspapers and magazines of the day.[3] Furthermore, big bands cycled through women jazz singers rapidly.[4] Although these singers found themselves in the spotlight, microphone in hand, in the jazz world and in popular memory their musical contributions are seen as few and far between.

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[1] *Billboard* (1938). In an obituary, Alfred T. Hendricks wrote, "She was 45 or thereabouts and she was a large woman…her casket was bronze and huge." See Alfred T. Hendricks, "Last Song for Velma Middleton: 'Just a Closer Walk With Thee,'" *New York Post*, Feb. 21, 1961. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ. See also "Velma Middleton Dies Overseas," *The Second Line,* Mar. – Apr. 1961, 27-32. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Hogan Jazz Archive, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

[2] One image shows Gertrude Niesen with a caption that read: "Gertrude Nieson is the epitome of Duke Ellington's composition, *Sophisticated Lady*. Her voice has a soft, intimate bedroom quality that sends the imagination 'reeling.' Visually she enhances the illusion. Her gowns, her hair styles, the sultry smile on her lips—all personify glamour…" See "Why Vocalists Go Over Big," *Music and Rhythm*, Oct. 1941, 24-25. Robert Peck Collection, Chicago Jazz Archive, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, IL.

[3] One issue of *Music and Rhythm* displays singer Gale Robbins lying on the floor, smiling with a microphone in hand. She wears a short sunflower dress, and the photograph prominently features her legs and high heels. The caption reads: "This is Gale Robbins, Art Jarret's lovely vocalist. She left the band several weeks ago to have a tooth pulled and hasn't been seen since. Jarret says he isn't sure what her status is at present." Despite not being able to sing with the band, Robbins' image still takes up half the page, displaying the emphasis on visual aspects of "girl singers." See "Inside Stuff By The Thin Man," *Music and Rhythm*, Oct. 1941, 11. Robert Peck Collection, Chicago Jazz Archive, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, IL.

[4] For example, between 1934 and 1940 Benny Goodman's band included singers such as Martha Tilton, Louise Tobin, Mildred Bailey, Helen Forrest, and Peggy Lee. Other girl singers after Lee included Liza Morrow, Jane Harvey, Dottie Reid, Carol Kay, Peggy Man, and Eve Young. There were other singers who recorded with him on shorter stints as well, and Goodman also recorded with Billie Holiday, Ethel Waters, and Bessie Smith.

Yet, women singers were a central component in connecting big bands to audience members, and their roles in big bands largely revolved around providing some sort of service for the big band. Functions of female singers included: entertaining, acting as glamorous spectacle, breaking up set lists of instrumental tunes, and satisfying the audience's longing for pleasant escape from the troubles of the Great Depression or World War II. Big bands, which emerged in the 1920s and were popularized by the mid 1930s, were markedly gendered organizations, often composed exclusively of male instrumentalists with a vocalist—sometimes a man, but more frequently, a woman.[5] The instrumentalists in the band typically numbered between twelve and twenty-five, including a rhythm section (drums, piano, and bass, sometimes with a guitar), a saxophone section, a trombone section, and a trumpet section. With predominantly males as instrumentalists, women vocalists performed affective labor through their singing, using storytelling, vocal expression, and lyric interpretation to convey meaning to audience members. Since singers performed vital functions for big bands—making them more marketable and diversifying the kind of entertainment offered—examining the reasons behind women singers' marginalization in history is necessary.

This dissertation examines how women singers of big bands negotiated race, gender, class, and sexuality through their music and performances from the 1930s to the 1950s. During their careers, singers proved their ability to perform certain societal expectations such as femininity, glamour, heterosexuality, and whiteness, and at other times, showed their ability to challenge these notions through their performances. This dissertation examines less-known women singers—including Helen Humes, Kay Starr, Helen Forrest, Thelma Carpenter, Louise

[5] It is important to note that Sherrie Tucker has also demonstrated the significance and contributions of all-women bands during the Swing Era. For the sake of scope, this study looks at big bands that were composed of men with women singers. See Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 14.

Tobin, and Maxine Sullivan—to understand why and how these women's stories were etched into history in ways that often minimized their contributions, music, and labor. The white and often male jazz critics who were key players in crafting jazz history and historiography seldom engaged these women's stories or took them seriously as part of jazz history.[6] However, during the Swing Era, both the mainstream press and music magazines vigorously debated these singers' authenticity, vocal talent, and ability to connect with a blues and jazz tradition, often crafting predictable narratives about singers' lives and stories. I demonstrate how big band singers' performances of music and identity complicated these predictable narratives by challenging traditional boundaries of genre (such as categories of jazz, blues, and popular music) as well as the black-white binary present in jazz discourse. They also challenged acceptable expressions of womanhood and sexuality, and the expectation that women's "private" issues—like the labor behind one's appearance—should remain apart from the public realm. Accounting for big band singers' performances of gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, body, and voice has the potential to transgress confining boundaries and categories and provides space to conceptualize their life stories and music differently by showing their contributions to music and culture, strategies of resistance to restrictive social norms, and tactics to pursue career success. Recognizing the valuable performances of women singers can allow us to see how audiences may have received embedded critiques in music and understood the significance of women's gendered labor. These performances illustrate the complexities of these women's lives and add depth to their memory, highlighting gendered labor in contrast to the often reductionist stories

[6] See John Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool: Jazz and its Critics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), and Mario Dunkel, "Writing Jazz History: The Emergence of a New Genre," in *Current Objectives of Postgraduate American Studies* (2010). See also, Nicholas M. Evans, *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Routledge, 2015) and David W. Stowe, *Swing Changes: Big-Band Jazz in New Deal America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

told in dominant discourse.

This project has two main aims: to bring a critical perspective to the ways in which women jazz singers were written about and discussed by audiences, critics, and band members, and to understand the significance of their performances both for the history of jazz and for our understanding of women's labor history. This project asks the following questions: What do the career paths of female singers of big bands show about the social and economic conditions of various women between the 1930s and the 1950s? What does this reveal about how power operated in the U.S. music industry, and the different ways women jazz singers asserted power through performance? How were women jazz singers of big bands received by audiences, critics, and band members during the 1930s to 1950s, and how did they assert agency in the face of the changing conditions of this time period, as well as the positions in which they found themselves? Women singers expressed desire, manipulated notions of popular sentimentality, adhered to and deviated from gender roles, added layers of meaning to music, expressed shared experiences/social conditions, named specific problems the communities, and constructed and affirmed a community audience.

Through their performances, these singers contested traditional boundaries of genre, such as jazz, blues, and popular music. The women in this study were chosen because each performed with big bands during the Swing Era: Helen Humes with Count Basie's Orchestra and Harry James' band; Thelma Carpenter with Teddy Wilson's Orchestra and Count Basie's Orchestra; Helen Forrest with Harry James' band and Benny Goodman's band; and Kay Starr with Joe Venuti and Charlie Barnet's band; and their stories have yet to be examined in-depth in this

context.[7] These women in particular exhibited significant maneuvering within debates over jazz music and authenticity, and they developed skillful techniques to project themselves in different ways depending on context and moved in and out of genres like blues, jazz, country, and popular music by shifting vocal styles. Though many of these women also pursued jazz and other styles of music in small groups or combos, embarked on solo careers, and entered Hollywood, their performances with big bands were a significant part of their career trajectories.

The women performers examined in this study challenged and manipulated the black-white binary that has been so present in jazz, while others reinforced it. Scholars such as Deborah Wong and Kevin Fellezs have argued that dominant jazz discourse has primarily been discussed within this binary, which erases and marginalizes other groups within jazz music.[8] Importantly, some of the women in this study disrupt this binary to show what Wong terms "Other colors in jazz."[9] Kay Starr, a Cherokee-Choctaw-Irish jazz singer, while often read as white by her audiences, continually affirmed and asserted her Native identity. She frequently discussed her upbringing on a reservation, and she became active in indigenous politics and philanthropy later in her life. On the other hand, Helen Forrest, a Jewish-American singer, navigated the shifting racial politics of whiteness in the 1930s to conform to dominant white beauty ideals. This allowed her to align with mainstream whiteness at some instances while asserting connections to Jewish artists—some of whom identified with African Americans and

[7] These are just a few of the bands these women performed with. Most toured with several throughout their careers.
[8] See Deborah Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance" in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, eds., Ronald M. Radano and Philip V. Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). 57-94. See also Kevin Fellezs, "Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz" in *Alien Encounters: Popular Culture in Asian America*, eds. Mimi Thi Nguyen and Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 69-108.
[9] Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance," 57.

"blackness"—at other instances.[10] Through their strategies, women performers made themselves visible, both within and outside of the black-white jazz binary.

The women in this study also challenged acceptable expressions of womanhood and sexuality through their performances both on stage and in their performances of identity more broadly. Through nostalgia tours, for instance, women singers defied the notion that performing in public was no longer acceptable for women after age thirty. For example, Maxine Sullivan and singers from 4 Girls 4 such as Rose Marie, Rosemary Clooney, Helen O'Connell, and Margaret Whiting, worked well into their 60s and 70s, presenting different notions of nostalgia and working womanhood through their bodies and voices in older age. Further, some of these performers challenged norms of gender and sexuality by critiquing "proper" constrained femininity on stage, as well as the notion that older women must keep sexual expression in private. These challenges to social norms show how performances on the stage and performances of identity provided a rich space for asserting power and for conveying meanings to audiences.

Many of these singers insisted on bringing issues generally understood as "private" into the public realm through their performances, including in oral histories and autobiographies, expanding our understanding of the gendered labor of female jazz performers. For instance, in her oral history, Helen Humes detailed the significance of her home and community life, as well as intimate details of life "on the road" with the big band. Her case shows how home and community life were integral to how women craft their own narratives in jazz history. Other singers like Kay Starr described in interviews her struggles with having a career while raising her

[10] For example, bandleader Artie Shaw, with whom Forrest performed, wrote about his "desire to be black" in his autobiography *The Trouble with Cinderella*. See Reva Marin, "Representations of Identity in Jewish Jazz Autobiography," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 45, no. 3 (2015): 323-353, and Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

daughter, while Helen Forrest depicted her struggles with her body and childbirth in great detail in her autobiography. Looking at moments when these women brought their gendered experiences of "private life" into the public realm shifts our understanding of jazz history to account for the many dimensions of women's labor.

My understanding of the labor of singing and performance stems from my own experiences as a singer, and my personal engagement with jazz music compelled me to further explore the lives and music of jazz singers whose songs I had heard many times before. The elements of making music—of feeling the rhythm from the bass, sensing the cue, sinking into a harmony with other singers, knowing a musical breath—have been essential to my understanding of the embodied process of singing jazz music both personally and academically. My own experiences as a vocalist in college were not unlike some of the issues vocalists faced in the 1930s to 1950s. As one of the few females in a 25-piece collegiate jazz band, there was a kind of pressure to dress, sing, and act in certain ways. Most of the band was comprised of male instrumentalists, and the singers (usually five or six) were majority female. Through my singing experiences with these various groups, I have become well acquainted with the elation and challenges of music and performance. I became particularly curious about the inequalities present in the music industry, and intrigued by the implicit expectations surrounding gender, sexuality, and race, as well as glamour and femininity. Why did so few women play instruments in the band? Why were the women singers expected to be glamorous? Why were we discouraged from wearing slacks during performances? Reflecting on my personal experiences on the stage further sparked my curiosity about gendered expectations and labor that go into any given performance, and the lives and music of women singers of big bands in history provided a rich space for exploring these questions.

With significant shifts in women's labor, the 1930s to the 1950s provides an important historical window into the developmental arc of big bands and mirrors how singers negotiated their places in the spotlight in light of changing socio-historical conditions and through the rise and decline of big band jazz. This time period aligns with the "Swing Era" but also extends to the time when big bands were beginning to decline in popularity after World War II, and singers needed to make choices about their career paths. Many jazz historians describe the "Swing Era" as beginning with either Duke Ellington's composition of "It Don't Mean a Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing" in 1932, or Benny Goodman band's performance at the Palomar Ballroom in Los Angeles.[11] When I use the term "Swing Era," I follow Gottschild's definition from *The Race Trope in Swing Era Performance*, which is more expansive in its chronology and recognizes the African American roots of early swing bands prior to Goodman's 1935 performance.[12] The Swing Era is significant because the rise of big bands saw an increased demand for singers. During the Swing Era, New Deal programs fueled big band business, and by 1935 people could spend more money on music and entertainment.[13] Further, the repeal of Prohibition greatly assisted the recovery of the music and entertainment industries, and venue owners could increase

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[11] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 14.

[12] Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (New York: Springer, 2016), 17. Gottschild writes, "I give the era a looser, more general (or generous) chronology in order to acknowledge its black roots in the work of groups led by musicians like Fletcher Henderson, Bennie Moten, Sam Wooding, Louis Armstrong, Don Redman, and Duke Ellington (to name only a few) that certainly were "swinging" early on. This broader time line acknowledges that swing and swing bands led by black musicians existed prior to the 1935 Goodman engagement" (17). Though the "Swing Era" can be understood as a marketing label that promotes periodization for commercial gain, Sherrie Tucker argues for its reformulation both as "a youth movement through which a generation of jitterbuggers found expression, identity, and community" and as a marketing campaign that aimed to keep the music going (17). See *Swing Shift*.

[13] Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 70. Erenberg has pointed out, "By the beginning of 1934, the owners of bars, restaurants, night clubs, and ballrooms had a secure revenue base that would permit them to present bands and musicians in open and legitimate settings" (70).

their bookings.[14] Women singers had to market themselves to navigate these conditions as well as the shifting styles of popular music, which moved from "sweet" music back to "hot" music in the 1930s. They altered their music styles, performance strategies, and interpretations in order to "make it" during this time period.

Just as Sherrie Tucker argues that women instrumentalists during World War II "played the changes" and responded to the socio-historical conditions in which they were placed, so too did women jazz singers through different kinds of labor: the labor of performance on stage as well as the labor of performances of womanhood and femininity.[15] From the beginning of the Swing Era, World War II ushered in changes in women's opportunities, work, and expectations. The image of Rosie the Riveter informed the expectation that white middle-class wives would temporarily replace men in the workforce, who would then return to unpaid labor once the war was over.[16] This expectation greatly contributed to ideas about women's labor and its impermanent nature, despite the fact that many women of color had always worked outside the home. Women in general were regarded as temporary workers, which allowed them some access to particular jobs they had not been able to enter before. Tucker argues that the popular ideal of womanhood from the 1920s and into the 1940s, remained the same, even as gender roles changed and many women began to work in jobs that men previously held. However, women of color singers performed womanhood and femininity in ways that deviated from these previous

[14] "Sweet music" included less improvisation, a lightly swinging feel, and focused on melody with medium tempos. "Hot music" included more solo improvisation, faster tempos, experimentalism, and an emphasis on rhythm. Styles of music were also racialized. Sally Placksin argues that by the 1930s, "White bands were often not expected (and not taught or trained) to play as "hot" or "rough" as black bands, while black bands were expected only to swing and play the blues, and nothing very 'sweet'" (187). See Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to the Present: Their Words, Lives, and Music*, (New York: Putnam Adult, 1982).
[15] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 69.
[16] Ibid., 17.

notions. While glamour was still an ideal in the absence of wealth and luxury during both the Great Depression and World War II, women jazz singers enacted a variety of notions of "womanhood." For instance, Kay Starr performed white working-class womanhood through her "hillbilly music" and country-influenced jazz performances. In short, women jazz singers responded to their audiences and industry demands through the presentation of themselves as well as through their music.

A central factor in women's performances was the audience's consumption of whiteness through both image and music. After Benny Goodman's performance at the Palomar in Los Angeles in 1935, jazz became increasingly popularized, and millions of young white Americans across the country began listening to jazz music. Many of the arrangements by black bands such as Fletcher Henderson's, Duke Ellington's, and Count Basie's—who had been performing swing music a decade earlier—were appropriated by white bands and consumed by white audiences.[17] Singers, too, were often expected to perform glamour and whiteness through both their music and image to fit popular ideas about female musicianship. For some women, this literally meant they would perform whiteness through their visual appearance (sometimes "passing" as white),[18] but also through their singing styles. For example, Helen Forrest changed her hair "to a bright shiska blond and presented herself in the most extravagant gowns," and she shifted her vocal style to align with popular mainstream ballads in ways that would distance her style from those of African American singers.[19] Singers also had to perform whiteness through their image.

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[17] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 15. See also LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).
[18] For scholarship on "passing" in American history, see Allyson Hobbs, *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).
[19] Will Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 593.

Forrest, for instance, sought to modify some of the signifiers of her Jewishness—namely her name and her nose—in order to project an image of idealized female beauty.

In contrast to white women singers, black women and other women of color faced a number of obstacles as they toured with big bands from the 1930s through the 1950s. Jim Crow reigned through the South, segregation and discrimination were commonplace, and African Americans were subjected to racial violence. There was widespread poverty, and it was challenging to make a living as a musician. "Race records" had limited marketability due to pervasive racism, and only opened a few doors for certain musicians, who were often exploited by those in power in the record industry. In addition, big bands had to travel constantly to sustain their careers, and for many African American bands, there were immense travel restrictions related to the war efforts, many more than white bands had.[20] The government restricted roads and limited the use of charter buses to conserve commodities during the war.[21] Since many black musicians did not have access to the performance spaces in hotels, ballrooms, and theaters, nor radio broadcasting opportunities, most black bands could not have overnight trips.[22] As detailed in Chapters 2 and 4, African American performers like Maxine Sullivan and Billie Holiday who performed with all-white bands encountered many of these obstacles on the road. These conditions dictated how women jazz singers positioned themselves with respect to race. Some individuals who were mixed race chose to "pass" as monoracial depending on the regions in which they were traveling and the bands with which they were touring.[23] Racial mixing on stage

[20] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 67.
[21] Ibid., 35-36.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 161.

was violently battled by some white venue owners.[24] Thus singers had to carefully navigate the racial politics of the 1930s to 1950s in performance venues, on tour, and through the presentation of their appearances.

While the troubled image of the black jazz singer as embodied by Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald persists in popular memory, this dissertation looks at how middle-class values informed black singers' success stories in the music scene. While for many African Americans and other people of color, poverty prevailed both in the South and in northern urban cities, some families, like that of Helen Humes's, faced fewer economic challenges. Working-class women who were musicians sometimes worked in the entertainment industry: theaters, red light districts, nightclubs, or cabarets.[25] For middle-class black women, many opportunities for musicianship came from access to education. Many families worked hard to send their daughters to college, with the expectation that they would return to their communities and fulfill the racial "uplift" ideology shared among the black middle class.[26] It became a challenging choice for women who wanted to pursue music and spent their weekends in dance halls and nightclubs making music, which was considered disreputable by some black, middle-class families.

As the Swing Era began to decline in the late 1940s, jazz music started to move in different directions with the development of cool jazz, free jazz, and jazz fusion. Much big band jazz music also moved in the direction of popular music. Many women jazz singers followed the

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[24] As detailed in Chapter 2, Billie Holiday was frequently unable to perform with Artie Shaw's all-white band, and her experiences on the road saw much violence and resistance by white venue owners.

[25] Sherrie Tucker, *A Feminist Perspective on New Orleans Jazzwomen* (New Orleans: New Orleans Jazz National Historical Park, 2004).

[26] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 113. Racial "uplift" ideology suggests that African Americans should work towards material success and moral progress to decrease white racism. As Kevin Gaines has argued, this ideology's focus on patriarchal power and separation of classes limited it in the fight against discrimination. See Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press Books, 2012).

trend toward popular music, as it seemed the best way to continue their careers in such a male-dominated profession. For some women jazz singers, their abilities to adapt to changing styles of music and circumstances prolonged their careers and success in the industry. Several women jazz singers in this study, including Kay Starr and Maxine Sullivan, participated in music long beyond 1950s, and some even performed in nostalgia tours into the 1980s. This study demonstrates how women jazz singers proved versatile performers in decades long after their "prime." These stories shed light on the diversity of performance strategies these women enacted for decades in order to sustain their careers and their music.

Jazz as a concept and as a musical genre has been hotly contested by scholars and critics, with recent scholarship in new jazz studies questioning the fruitfulness of these debates.[27] Instead of focusing on what *is* or *isn't* jazz, this dissertation looks at how women maneuvered categorization that sought to define their lives and careers, particularly when it came to genre, identity, music, and authenticity. In following David Ake and the contributors to *Jazz/Not Jazz*, I contend that jazz does not include "essential characteristics," but instead acts as a fluid site of meaning-making.[28] The women singers in this study performed and participated in these debates over jazz, and they can be considered sites upon which debates over jazz were played out, especially in the realms of authenticity/commercialism, improvisation, race and gender, genre distinctions, and performance techniques. The label of "jazz singer" itself was implicated in

[27] See David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark, eds., *Jazz/Not Jazz* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2012).

[28] Ibid., Ake says, "Some jazz performances swing; others feature a different groove or no groove at all. Some jazz highlights improvisation; some of it is meticulously planned in advance (a point of view even that improviser par excellence Charlie Parker maintained). Some jazz adopts an unflinchingly "important" and anticommercial stance; much of it openly courts the marketplace or invites us simply to have a good time. Some jazz musicians possess a strong moral compass and toil to build a more just society; others are self-centered louts" (12-13).

ideas about an individual's musicianship and authenticity.[29] Lara Pellegrinelli writes, "Jazz singing can be viewed as a significant ideological battleground for who and what jazz is, a domain where the meaning of the broader term has continually been challenged."[30] I use the term "jazz singer" broadly to show these singers' engagement with histories of jazz. The lines of inclusion and exclusion frequently shifted and were reconfigured often. The women singers in this study can be understood as moving in and out of "jazz" music, culture, and performance, but are a central component of its history and music.

The Jazz Archive

The written jazz archive, where many stories of women singers are generated and contained, exists in the specific and general sense and is largely male dominated in both realms. Kathy Ferguson distinguishes types of archives, including the "specific archive," a place where one stores documents and records, and the "general archive," "the meaning-making system that allows for some statements to be enunciated and others to lack intelligibility."[31] On the specific archive level, collections most frequently contain the documents and histories of men, and the

[29]Lara V. Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," PhD diss., (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2005), 4. As Pellegrinelli points out, "jazz singing is a category with implied limitations and that a jazz vocalist would not ordinarily qualify as a "true musician" (4). In this dissertation, I define "jazz singer" broadly. Vocalists need not scat to be considered jazz singers.

[30] Ibid., 14-15.

[31] Kathy E. Ferguson, "Theorizing Shiny Things: Archival Labors," *Theory & Event* 11, no. 4 (2008). Ferguson argues for both levels of archive as having political potential: "Transformative political possibilities exist at both levels of archives: specific archives can feature anti-establishment voices, cultivating protest and struggle as legitimate elements of memory; the general archive, the archival milieu, can foreground the threads or strands within available social imaginaries that enable and reflect anti-hegemonic practices."

collections and folders on women musicians are sparse.[32] On the jazz archive's general level, "the histories of musical men" dominate the public memory's understanding of the Swing Era and the stories of women singers of big bands are absent, minimized, or marginalized.[33] This promotes the myth that singers did not play a significant role in big band history. For example, as Tucker points out, the male writers of music magazines did not take women singers seriously: "As jokes and cartoons in *Down Beat* indicate, stereotypes about 'girl singers' highlighted a shortage of musical knowledge and an entertaining excess of sex appeal."[34] The information in these specific archives was largely crafted and managed by men. In order to locate information on women singers as it exists in the written jazz archive, this study draws from archival locations such as the Chicago Jazz Archive at the University of Chicago, Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University, the Fillius Jazz Archive at Hamilton College, New York Public Library Center for the Performing Arts, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the Irving S. Gilmore Library at Yale University, and Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies. While much of the written information about women singers was authored, organized, and archived by men, these locations contain both primary and secondary sources that shape the jazz archive on multiple levels. Other materials found in specific archives, such as records, recordings, and film, provide another avenue for understanding women's stories. These materials enable listeners to hear the sounds and see the performances of singers in ways that exceed the written page.

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[32] As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has pointed out, silencing "is due to uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives" (27). The stories and perspectives of women singers were often muted in the production of the jazz archive. These silences can occur at "the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the making of history in the final instance)" (26). See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 27.
[33] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 6.
[34] Ibid.

My project demonstrates how past music critics mirrored prevailing understandings of gender and labor that made women's labor peripheral, if not invisible, in how they wrote about women singers, but also shows how women singers both shaped and contested boundaries of jazz and popular music, important markers of American identity. Past music critics' work maintained jazz as an exclusive, masculine domain that was solidified in the written jazz archive, which includes the history and historiography of jazz music. As Sherrie Tucker has argued, "The dominant swing texts are not gender neutral (although they pass themselves off as such); they are the histories of musical men."[35] In the past few decades, however, scholars of jazz and popular music studies have written about the contributions of women musicians and performers as well as the role of gender in jazz and American history.[36] While this scholarship on gender and jazz is very valuable, it has yet to fully account for the significance of these big band singers' performances. I argue that the debates over women singers found in the written jazz archive's documents point to larger anxieties about those who did not fall neatly into legible categories in American music because of their racial, ethnic, gender, class, or sexuality-related transgressions. Debates over these singers' performances of music and gendered and racialized societal norms sometimes led to their exclusion from the category of "jazz singers." Often, defining singers as "popular" also labeled them as fungible and fleeting, limiting their impact and presence in

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[35] Ibid.

[36] See Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Sherrie Tucker, *Swing Shift: "All-girl" Bands of the 1940s* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Linda Dahl, *Stormy Weather: The Music and Lives of a Century of Jazzwomen* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984); Antoinette D. Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1998); Antoinette D. Handy, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Ladies' Jazz Band from Piney Woods Country Life School* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 1998); and Sally Placksin, *American Women in Jazz: 1900 to the Present: Their Words, Lives, and Music* (New York: Putnam Adult, 1982).

historical memory.

In this study, I expand the notion of the traditional written jazz archive by showing how women's stories and performances intervene in dominant narratives of jazz history; accounting for singers' performance strategies as well as their performances of identity through self-presentations and self-representations challenged the boundaries and borders of jazz music that were drawn by white male jazz critics. Popular cultural and jazz studies have long included a masculinist bias—one that restricts theoretical possibilities of women's performances and has constricted ways of analyzing women's music and cultural production.[37] This study seeks to understand the performance strategies of singers like Maxine Sullivan in order to offer other possibilities for performance to locate "increased ways to analyze black expressive forms."[38] In her work on Valaida Snow, Jayna Brown poignantly articulates that in the 1930s:

> The lines between black stage performance and what would become known as 'pure' jazz were not as strictly policed as they would become in later years, the result of the efforts of jazz purists developing approaches to the analysis of jazz during this period. Drawing these defining lines around 'real' jazz involved dismissing as contaminated those forms of jazz performance that combined and blurred the lines between black variety stage techniques and pure music. Many women were singers; part of their marginalization from

[37] Jayna Brown, "Dat Var Negressen Walaida Snow," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, no. 1 (2006): 51.
[38] Ibid. See also Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). Feldstein demonstrates how black woman performers of the Civil Rights movement raised issues of gender in their fight for racial equality while providing audiences with ways to see new possibilities of freedom through the entertainer's performances.

> the jazz canon is due to this critical urge towards uncontaminated instrumentalism, which was and still is understood as the progeny of blessed unions between men.[39]

For black women singers, some of their music was thus expelled from "the jazz tradition." Other singers were criticized for their performance of "popular" or "commercial" music, which increasingly acquired a negative connotation. These labels excluded some singers from jazz history. I interrogate what these boundaries and borders meant for the lives and music of the singers in this study, and I center the sounds of their music and their performances to see how women challenged those boundaries. Their stories contest the very history that has been constructed about them.

One of the limits of this study is the unevenness with which women jazz singers surfaced in specific archives. When I began this project, I had located names and traces of many singers who performed with big bands during this time period. However, in the archives, sometimes the only remaining trace of those singers was a passing reference or a single photograph. It was challenging to piece together a sustained history of women big band singers based on tiny pieces of often fragmentary evidence. However, as Jeanne Scheper points out, "Paying attention to the fragmentary, performed, material, and affective traces of these diva histories aids not only in understanding what took place on the stage long ago but in constructing the overall import, significance, and efficacy of the dance or performance, then, now, and in the future."[40] Though some performers were quite popular in earlier times, they have still disappeared in popular and scholarly memory based on what has been left in the jazz archive.[41] While I include the stories of singers who are less-known in popular memory, some voices are still more prominent than

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[39] Brown, "Dat Var Negressen Walaida Snow," 56.
[40] Jeanne Scheper, *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, and Remembering the Modern Stage* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 12.
[41] Ibid., 13.

others.

The concept of performance emerges in several different manifestations in this dissertation, and I use the term to capture the many dimensions of women's performances. On one level, I analyze singers' performances of music, on stage, on records, and on screen. I also employ the concept of performance in the embodied sense to consider "how people use their bodies (consciously or not) to express their desires and ideas, communicate with others, and make meaning within a specific time and place."[42] In addition, I frame sources such as oral histories, interviews, and autobiographies as performances in order to recognize singers' self-conscious performance in storytelling and writing. The broad usage of the term performance allows us to recognize the many ways in which singers consciously and unconsciously used available platforms to convey messages and communicate meanings.

Literature Review

This dissertation engages American studies and jazz/popular music studies, using an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach to the subjects and material in this study. I utilize cultural studies, performance studies, music, and history to understand the social, cultural, and political effects of various performance practices found within women's jazz singing.[43] Both performances and recordings sometimes allowed women to carve out a place to assert cultural authority, while at other times restricted them within the confines of the music industry. Scholars such as Jayna Brown and Daphne Brooks have shown how black women's performance strategies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had an immense impact on art and popular

[42] Clare Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats: American Choreography in Cultural Exchange* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.
[43] Patrick E. Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

culture and on the construction of racial identities.[44] This study similarly highlights performance strategies as well as the interplay of art, culture, and the performance of identity.

My dissertation engages the work of women's music history scholars, who have documented women musician's important contributions to jazz, by adding a specific focus on women jazz singers and an emphasis on performance studies. The work of Linda Dahl, Antoinette Handy, and Sally Placksin has paved the way for subsequent generations of feminist scholars through their important contributions that detail women's significant presence in jazz throughout history.[45] These texts do not, however, often focus on women singers. This study focuses on the women singers largely absent from contemporary scholarship, building from the notion of gender as a social construct, and music as a constitutive element of gender formation. Several key works on gender and jazz act as springboards for this project, including the work of Angela Davis and Sherrie Tucker. Davis' *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* demonstrates how blues women projected a black, working-class feminist consciousness through their music and performances in which gender and sexuality were central.[46] The community aspect of the blues translates into jazz music in a unique way for women, who as vocalists were few in number compared to their male counterparts, and as audience members could see possibilities of

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[44] See Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls*, and Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*.

[45] See Dahl, *Stormy Weather;* Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras* and *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*; and Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*. These authors intervened in jazz history by tracing the significant impacts that women have had on jazz, and they have showed how women's participation and engagement shaped jazz as we know it. Sherrie Tucker's "A Feminist Perspective on New Orleans Jazz women" argues that a gender analysis can explain how adding women to jazz (from the 1980s histories) has not altered the notion of jazz as a masculine and manly genre of music. Tucker also calls for an examination of how people utilize music, and jazz specifically, and how this music has an impact on the social construction of gender.

[46] See Angela Yvonne Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude" Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999).

communities among women through jazz music. My dissertation interrogates the relationship between the singer and the audience to see the ways in which performances may have served as a vehicle for the expression of feminist consciousness for various communities of women.

Drawing on performance studies and studies of the voice provides new ways of understanding women's agency on the stage and in the music industry more generally, and can give insights into how women navigated the changing sociohistorical conditions and gender relations of the 1930s to 1950s. This study builds on Tucker's approach to gender and jazz while incorporating other fields, such as performance studies and studies of the voice, in order to explore power dynamics between the big band and the singer and to locate other ways in which women's agency and experiences in music can be understood. Tucker's *Swing Shift* gives a history of women musicians in "all-girl" bands of the 1940s drawing on ethnographic work and history, importantly focusing on the role of gender and race in women's experiences.[47] Her insights about the labor of performance during the Swing Era are also significant to this study. Roland Barthes "The Grain of the Voice" helps to consider the ways in which music critics have described voice and argues for the potential of the "grain" in evaluating music by focusing on the body and its performances.[48] Imagining ways in which women expressed agency through their performances can lead to greater understanding of the process of cultural production, the operation of power, and the impact of music on subjective experience.

This dissertation explores societal expectations of womanhood as nuanced and dynamic, and looks at how women negotiated these expectations in diverse ways. The performance of these expectations also varied across genre and venue/geographic location, with respect to race,

[47] See Tucker, *Swing Shift*.
[48] Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne, (London: Routledge, 2012), 505, 509.

class, gender, and sexuality. In *Ladies of Labor*, Nan Enstad articulates how alternate notions of "ladyhood" have been articulated with respect to class and race.[49] This study builds from the idea that women of different backgrounds created alternate notions of "ladyhood" through some of their performances, making certain spaces and personas subversive and their own. In this way, my dissertation also takes seriously the labor of gender and performance, and engages with notions of dominant and alternative womanhood. It also pays attention to the times when women jazz singers performed dominant notions of womanhood to give insight into how power operated in the music industry. For instance, when and in what contexts could women assert themselves, and when were they limited?

This study employs gender analysis to listen closely to women singers' words and stories, to the messages conveyed through these singers' performances and voices, and to the stories that are told in the dominant written jazz archives, building on the work of scholars who "listen for gender" in jazz studies.[50] Nichole Rustin and Sherrie Tucker have assembled interdisciplinary work in jazz studies that centralizes gender analysis "as a tool for exploring how the aesthetics of the music have been shaped, directed, and recorded by fans, critics, historians, and musicians and for examining the conditions of possibility that artists have maintained and developed as jazz has

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[49] Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 2.

[50] Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker centralize "listening for gender" in their work. See Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, eds., *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1. Others who focus on gender in music include Eileen M. Hayes, *Songs in Black and Lavender: Race, Sexual Politics, and Women's Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Kristin A. McGee, *Some Liked It Hot: Jazz Women in Film and Television, 1928–1959* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan, 2009); O'Meally, Robert G., Brent Hayes Edwards, and Farah Jasmine Griffin, eds. *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Sherrie Tucker, *Dance Floor Democracy: The Social Geography of Memory at the Hollywood Canteen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Sherrie Tucker, "When Did Jazz Go Straight?: A Queer Question for Jazz Studies." *Critical Studies in Improvisation* 4, no. 2

grown."[51] This project follows Rustin and Tucker's approach to listening to gender—an interdisciplinary practice—with a specific focus on women singers of big bands. Listening for gender allows us to see how women represented their stories, experiences, and labor through different sources, including oral histories, songs, and interviews, as well as how they used performance techniques to present markers of race, gender, class, and sexuality in different contexts. It allows us to see how women singers' choices, careers, and musical performances were both enabled and constricted by existing and ever-shifting systems of power in the music world.

Some jazz scholars do not recognize the contributions of singers who engaged in both jazz and popular music, which is perhaps one reason why many women singers of big bands have yet to be discussed. This study engages the overlaps of jazz music and popular culture, as women singers often navigated these interactions.[52] The inseparability of jazz music, popular music, and culture makes this intervention in the field crucial and necessary. This is particularly important for women jazz singers, who were extremely versatile in their performances and careers. Many performed music from diverse genres, blended genres together, and worked with various kinds of groups.

I also utilize performance studies to show how women performed both mainstream and alternative societal expectations and norms, as well as how they engaged theatricality in their performances. The stage provided singers an opportunity to gain power and visibility, as Susan Glenn points out of popular theater in her book *Female Spectacle*. Glenn sheds light on how

[51] Ibid., 2.
[52] See Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America's Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1990).

theater allowed female performers to be metaphors and agents of shifting gender relations.[53] While performers were sometimes transgressive in their performances and appearances (many had more space to experiment after they left big bands for solo careers), other times they upheld the dominant picture of the "girl singer." My dissertation zooms in on those moments when women jazz singers were able to push back against dominant norms and restrictive societal structures through their performances, and also investigates the moments when they did not do this. Singers' adherence to or deviation from dominant norms gives insight into the constraints placed upon women during their lives, and performance served as a valuable tool to navigate their careers.

Scholarship in performance studies and sound studies has paved pathways for hearing singers' stories from innovative, diverse perspectives and has informed central aspects of this study. Paige McGinley has shown how blues women of the early twentieth century utilized costumes and vocal and bodily performances to rattle notions of "authenticity" in blues music while performing diverse theatrical numbers in inventive ways.[54] Many of the singers in this study were subjected to rubrics of "authenticity" in their music and performances, something that was greatly informed by notions of gender and race. Alison McCracken has shown how young male crooners of the 1920s and 1930s also negotiated norms of gender and sexuality, serving as an important counterpoint to the women in this study. Concerns over performances of gender and sexuality—specifically, vocal performances—caused cultural authorities to attempt to regulate

[53] Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3.
[54] Paige A. McGinley, *Staging the Blues: From Tent Shows to Tourism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

and censor male crooners.[55] Thus women singers who projected socially acceptable expressions of gender and sexuality became increasingly valuable in big bands. The meanings of singers' performances that emerged through sound and image contained racialized, gendered, and sexualized understandings of bodies. As Jennifer Stoever has argued, sound and listening practices play a central role in upholding, (re)producing, and challenging racialized structures in society and in discourse.[56] In this study, I present my own interpretations of songs, following Bruce Smith's notion of historic acoustic phenomenology and Steven Feld's articulation of acoustemology.[57] Feld argues for the potential of "acoustic knowing," or sonic pathways that open up understandings of embodied experiences.[58] Other sound studies scholars like Jonathan Sterne have argued for sound's role as "a particular path through history" that is bound with other projects across disciplines, like this one.[59] These scholars from diverse fields have laid the groundwork for hearing the stories of women jazz singers differently.

I use discourse analysis and performance studies to analyze singers' stories as they were constructed through various sources—newspapers, magazines, oral histories, autobiographies,

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[55] See Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

[56] Jennifer Lynn Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016). See also Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

[57] Bruce Smith defines historical acoustic phenomenology as "you can know nothing apart from the way in which you come to know it," and Steven Feld's "acoustemology" as "one's sonic way of knowing and being in the world" (482). See Steven Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea," in *Senses of Place*, ed. Steven Feld and Keith Basso (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996). See also Steven Feld and Donald Brenneis. "Doing Anthropology in Sound." *American* Ethologist 31, no. 4 (November 1, 2004) and Richard Cullen Rath. "Hearing American History," *The Journal of American History* 95, no. 2 (September 2008): 417–31.

[58] Feld, "Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea," 97.

[59] Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past,* 3.

music, ephemera, and performances—as well as the singers' own grapplings with these stories. These diverse archives allow me to see how big band singers enacted various performances in different contexts. In addition, my project uses discourse analysis of newspapers, performance reviews, and record reviews in magazines like *Down Beat*, *Billboard,* and *Metronome* to gain insight into how critics and communities received, endorsed, or scrutinized singers. I have examined biographies, oral histories, and documents of singers and bandleaders to see how the stories of these women singers have been included or excluded in history. The performances that these singers projected during their careers often pushed back against mainstream media. For example, Helen Forrest, "the voice of the name bands," used her autobiography to rewrite the stories that had circulated in the press. In doing so, she constructed narratives in which she asserted agency in her choices of plastic surgery, romantic encounters, and adherence to dominant beauty norms.

Chapter Outline

This study begins by looking at the politics of storytelling in the jazz archive. Chapter 1 examines how the "success stories" and early careers of singers Helen Humes, Thelma Carpenter, and Louise Tobin were narrated in newspapers and magazines. I argue that dominant stories in the written jazz archive trivialize women singers' stories and lives, and that these stories obscure diverse experiences and gendered labor. The dominant stories in the written jazz archive emerge in such forms as "discovery narratives," coming-of-age stories, and romantic success stories: narrative forms that rely on common stories and limit the possibility of a more complex understanding of singers' lives. For instance, in the mainstream press, black women are made famous by being found by male bandleaders before being launched into stardom, and in

romantic success stories, white women's careers are enabled through the powerful men they date and marry. This framing serves to reduce the importance of women's careers along racialized lines while affirming male power. Chapter 1 sets up a framework for understanding how and why women's lives and contributions have been narrated in jazz history. It also engages women's performances, self-representation in media, and oral histories to offer ways of thinking stories differently.

Chapter 2 examines debates in the press surrounding Cherokee-Choctaw-Irish singer Kay Starr's musical and racial "authenticity." Starr's racialization—made possible through her voice, body, music, and performances—allowed her to claim a limited but strategic position within jazz music. Starr asserted a Native identity while promoting her working-class roots, while also insisting on feminine performances of the body and shifting her vocal style depending on audience demands and performance purpose as a means to see success in her career. Her story illuminates the diversity of singers who moved in and out of jazz.

Chapter 3 examines Helen Forrest's autobiography *I Had the Craziest Dream* to explore performances of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability through women's autobiography. Forrest used her autobiography as a space to re-write the stories that circulated in the press. The press frequently reported on her relationships and changes to her appearance in ways that diminished her reputation and her power/agency. In her autobiography, Forrest sought to re-frame stories about her life, including the meanings of her Jewish identity, the sexual and gender politics of performing with a big band, and her relationship with Billie Holiday. Forrest attempted to justify changes to her appearance and body to align with dominant beauty ideals, and she also depicted the challenges of the aging performer on stage, drawing attention to the unique obstacles of women performers. She diversified jazz history's understanding of "girl

singers" by offering intimate details of the sexual and gender politics of performing with a big band. She also leveraged her time touring with Billie Holiday to promote her career while defining herself against African American culture and troubling narratives of "Black-Jewish relations" in jazz. As a whole, her autobiography displays a means through which women performers could assert power and control in crafting their own legacy.

Chapter 4 analyzes big band nostalgia tours of 4 Girls 4 and the comeback tours of Maxine Sullivan from the late 1960s to the 1980s. 4 Girls 4 was a music revue that toured from 1977 to 1989 and included several predominately white singers who performed with big bands during the 1940s and 1950s, such as Rosemary Clooney, Margaret Whiting, Rose Marie, and Helen O'Connell. Each of these singers had been performing individually in the 1970s, but had not seen much success in their older years until they came together in 4 Girls 4. Maxine Sullivan was an African American singer who got her start in the 1930s by swinging folk songs with Claude Thornhill's band. She later returned to the music business in the late 1960s, after she raised her daughter. In this chapter, I examine how these singers' bodies and voices perform signifiers of gender, race, and age through specific modes of nostalgia. I look specifically at how the aging voices and bodies of women jazz singers served to both conform to and transgress standards of femininity, vocal production, and image presentation that were dominant during the 1930s and 1940s. The performances of these bodies and voices on nostalgia tours "staged age" through visual and sonic signifiers that presented audiences with a way to "see and hear age." For big band female singers in older age, the deepening of the voice served to work against the hyper-feminine glamorous "entertaining complement" to the bands that they once served. Singers' performances demonstrated the importance of working womanhood in older age,

unveiling the labor behind images of glamour and leisure.[60] They showed the possibilities and challenges of creating nostalgia through the voice and body in older age, and embodied specific notions of the past and present to make themselves marketable to audiences.

[60] See Tucker, *Swing Shift*.

Chapter 1

The Politics of Storytelling in the Jazz Archive: Gender, Race, and Women Jazz Singers of Big Bands

Introduction

In an April 1942 issue of *Music and Rhythm*, John Hammond authored a number of articles including "War Threatens Record Output," "Artie Shaw To Train Army Bands," and "Tom Dorsey Will Sweeten Brass With Fiddles."[1] The bulk of the page reports the news of the 1940s jazz world, including band changes and the impact of World War II. Hammond's page also contains two photographs of singers—made-up blonde white women who pose with a gaze to the side. One caption reads: "Strawberry Blonde with Claude Thornhill's band is blue-eyed Martha Wayne. She's five feet, two inches tall and weighs 98 pounds."[2] The photos contain sparse text, and none of the articles on the page correspond to the images. In the left corner, an article's bolded title reads "Ella Fitzgerald Will Quit As Leader." It frames Fitzgerald's departure from Chick Webb's orchestra as an act of abandonment, emphasizing relinquishing leadership over the importance of her next vocal pursuit—a vocal-instrumental group called the "Three Keys." This page is typical of jazz publications of the 1940s in that it flaunts white women's photographs, undermines black women's successes, and reserves most space for the pursuits of "serious" male musicians.

The stories of women big band singers of the 1930s and 1940s have been marginalized in the written jazz archive. While much scholarship in recent decades has attended to the

[1] John Hammond, "War Threatens Record Output," *Music and Rhythm*, Apr. 1942, 23. Robert Peck Collection, Box 6, Folder 3, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center.
[2] Ibid.

significance and contributions of women instrumentalists in jazz, women jazz singers of big bands have been less discussed and their stories have seldom been critically engaged from a historical perspective.[3] Some research has been conducted on major figures in jazz singing like Anita O'Day, Billie Holiday, and Lena Horne,[4] but if we only hear the dominant stories in jazz history, the many stories of other women who performed with big bands during the popularly termed "Swing Era" become less audible.[5] Even in studies of women's jazz history, women singers of big bands have largely been glossed over as "easily forgettable."[6]

In this chapter, I build on the work of theorists who "listen for gender"[7] in the written jazz archive to illuminate the gendered and racialized politics that underwrite the stories of women jazz singers of big bands. I argue that dominant stories in the written jazz archive operate in ways that trivialize women singers' stories and lives, and that these stories work to cover up diverse experiences and gendered labor. Success stories in the written jazz archive emerge in

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[3] Tucker, *Swing Shift*; Dahl, *Stormy Weather*; Handy, *Black Women in American Bands and Orchestras*; Handy, *The International Sweethearts of Rhythm*; Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*; and Nichole T. Rustin and Sherrie Tucker, *Big Ears*. It is important to note that there has been excellent scholarship on Billie Holiday by Farah Jasmine Griffin as well as performers of the civil rights movement by Ruth Feldstein, among others. However, in my study, I shift my focus to different stories of less popular/less remembered figures to move away from the dominant idea that jazz a genre and culture that is shaped only by a very few.

[4] See Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene"; Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); and Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free*. Scholarship about "jazz singing" and the lives of jazz singers by popular music critics such as Will Friedwald has often been written through biographical accounts that rarely address how race, class, gender, and sexuality played out in the lives of these singers—essential components for understanding the complexities of these singers' lives and music. See Will Friedwald, *Jazz Singing* and *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers* (New York: Pantheon, 2010); and Bruce Crowther and Mike Pinfold, *Singing Jazz: The Singers and Their Styles* (Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 1997).

[5] Amiri Baraka and Sherrie Tucker have discussed how "Swing Era" was a label of a time period constructed by music industry moguls as a way to market black music to white audiences. The "Swing Era" label reveals commodification of jazz products both in the past and present.

[6] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 124.

[7] Rustin and Tucker, *Big Ears*, 1.

such forms as "discovery narratives," coming-of-age stories, and romantic success stories, narrative forms that rely on common tropes and elements and reduce the importance of women's careers while affirming male power. These stories vary based on the press, the race of the singer, and the intended audience. For example, the mainstream press, including newspapers like *The New York Times*, crafted "discovery narratives" that elided the power of women singers, while some black magazines like *Ebony* narrated along the lines of respectability politics, promoting the idea that black singers could achieve upward mobility by working hard in the face of racism. To demonstrate how dominant stories in the written jazz archive minimize women's contributions and stories, I draw attention to what Clare Hemmings has called "the political grammar of storytelling."[8] "Political grammar" refers to how the craft of history is structured: which stories are repeated, how those stories are constructed, the techniques used to compose narratives, and the larger political implications of these stories.[9] The "political grammar of storytelling" I interrogate here focuses especially on the repetitive and adaptable narrative mechanisms used by jazz critics and historians to frame the stories they tell about women singers. For example, mainstream newspapers frequently employed narratives of romance to describe the career success of white women singers of big bands, while framing black women's success as enabled by and contingent on white males. Like much of jazz criticism and history, the mechanisms that regularly appear in women jazz singers' success stories are driven by white male perspectives.[10]

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[8] Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2.
[9] Ibid., 227.
[10] See Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool* and Dunkel, "Writing Jazz History: The Emergence of a New Genre." See also, Evans, *Writing Jazz* and Stowe, *Swing Changes*.

Though scholars like John Gennari and Mario Dunkel have traced the development of jazz criticism and the creation of dominant jazz archives, there is much room to further examine gender, race, and sexuality by looking at how the stories about women jazz singers of big bands have been crafted.[11] In particular, examining the role that gender, race, and sexuality played in dominant storytelling can lead us to a better understanding of processes of historical erasure through dominant media sources, how certain types of women's labor have been made invisible and undermined, and how alternative storytelling approaches and archival sources such as performances, self-representation in media, and oral histories can challenge the dominant narratives of the written jazz archive.

This study uses an intersectional lens to examine the stories told through performance and self-representation to challenge dominant narratives in the written jazz archive.[12] I utilize these approaches to point to the limits of the written jazz archive's construction and offer possible ways of thinking stories differently.[13] As Anjali Arondekar argues about sexuality in the colonial archive in India, "[t]he critical challenge is to imagine a practice of archival reading that incites relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates."[14] Being aware of the impulse to recover while simultaneously reflecting on what pieces are missing, I hope to draw attention to the various processes of reading archives to present other methods of inquiry, especially ones that "listen for gender." As Rustin and Tucker argue, "Listening for gender in jazz studies shifts the contours of jazz history: the boundaries and

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[11] Ibid. See also "Deconstructing the Jazz Tradition: The "Subjectless Subject" of New Jazz Studies" in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, eds. Ake, David, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark. 264-284. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
[12] Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 3.
[13] Ibid., 15-16.
[14] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 1.

definitions of what counts as jazz sounds and practices, and our awareness of whose bodies are seen and not seen as jazz bodies."[15] Methodological approaches found in performance studies and black feminist theory enable storytelling as a kind of feminist theorizing that "listens for gender" in the jazz archive. In this chapter, I listen for gender not only in men's representations of these singers, but also through women's performances—including their self-representations in oral histories and interviews. I do this by highlighting how women narrated their own stories of their early careers in ways that drew attention to experiences that underline gender, race, and sexuality and by comparing these less-known accounts to dominant ones in jazz history.

This chapter investigates both the "archive" and the "repertoire" to show how stories are narrated and how performance theory can illuminate the role of gender, race, and sexuality in the experiences of women jazz singers of big bands.[16] The "archive" refers to "the more officially recognized, often text-based historical record," and the "repertoire" refers to "the embodied acts that often resist cultural practices' hegemonic constrictions and documentations."[17] Voices and performances of women jazz singers work to "support, exceed, and sometimes, critique the written word."[18] It is in this way that we can better understand how the written jazz archive—that is, the written works about women jazz singers present in newspapers, biographies, and swing histories—has emerged as a dominant force of cultural memory in jazz while the stories and performances of women jazz singers of big bands have been largely forgotten. I analyze a variety of sources including mainstream and black newspapers, music magazines, performance reviews, and secondary sources of jazz history to critique the trivialization of women's labor and

[15] Rustin and Tucker, *Big Ears*, 19.
[16] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[17] Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 24.
[18] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Croft, *Dancers as Diplomats*, 24.

experiences in the dominant jazz archive. I also examine oral histories, self-representation in media, and performances to understand and illustrate how these sources diversify the stories that are told in dominant discourse and to suggest that this approach can pose a challenge to dominant cultural memory in the written jazz archive.

Each of the following sections takes a different approach to listening for gender in the stories and lives of Helen Humes, Thelma Carpenter, and Louise Tobin to illustrate how the dominant press has crafted their stories and to demonstrate various alternative approaches to telling these stories. Focusing on the stories of these less-known women jazz singers of big bands, I draw attention to the politics of citation in jazz history and open up new ways of storytelling.[19]

"Discovery Narratives" in the Mainstream Press

In the stories told in mainstream newspapers and magazines, women singers were repeatedly "discovered" by male bandleaders and managers (most often white), who were depicted as the agents who launched the singers to success. For example, a 1976 *The New York Times* article by John S. Wilson describes the repeated "discovery" of Helen Humes, a blues and jazz singer who began performing in the 1920s and had a long career into the 1970s. This article, along with many others, frames Humes' success in the music industry as a series of perchance happenings upon by male musicians and managers. The fact that Humes' "discovery" and "rediscovery" are articulated twelve separate times in one article suggests that male musicians

[19] Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 22-23. I call attention to citation tactics in jazz history in order to demonstrate how dominant stories (those stories that are heard and cited regularly in jazz history) work to cover up and marginalize other stories in jazz history. When we think about "the politics of citation," as Hemmings describes, we can see "how repetition actively works to obscure the politics of its own production and reproduction" (22).

and managers both enabled Humes' path to success and guided the audience to "discover" Humes' music. This framing not only suggests that Humes is lost in the music industry, but also that she is unable to sustain her own career and constantly needs to be found by others. The article states, "When the Sears band reached the Renaissance Ballroom in New York, Miss Humes was discovered again—this time by John Hammond, who had discovered Billie Holiday and had recruited many musicians for both Benny Goodman and Count Basie."[20] In this narrative, John Hammond, a white male jazz producer, is responsible for "discovering" Billie Holiday and Helen Humes while "recruiting" presumably male musicians for the bands of Benny Goodman and Count Basie. In this article, women of color jazz singers are treated as rare finds who are then launched into success by managers and bandleaders.

While the general theme of "discovery" in Wilson's article is reflective of the big band nostalgia that surfaced in the 1970s (See Chapter 4), it also points to a larger mode through which women jazz singers' labor, particularly the labor of singers of color, was undercut in jazz history, and subsequently, in its historiography. Part of the reason behind singers' marginalization in history is that singers have occupied a contradictory space within jazz music and jazz history. While they were in the spotlight and with a microphone, often garnering the attention of audiences and being perceived as central figures of big bands, they were also overlooked as jazz creators and innovators in the jazz community. Their positions as singers and as women then relegated them to the sidelines of musicianship in history, as the dominant thought in jazz circles has concluded that "most singers aren't real musicians" and that

[20] John S. Wilson, "Helen Humes Discovered Again at 63," *The New York Times*, Aug. 27, 1976. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

instrumentalists are mostly responsible for jazz practices, standards, values, and history.[21] Yet, many women of color were described as forces of nature waiting to be discovered, often with "natural" talent that had to be harnessed by the major players in the music industry. This framing effectively served to erase the labor of performance, including rehearsing, making oneself visually appealing for audiences, and networking through local, small-scale performances.[22] In essence, dominant narratives erased singers' own independent efforts to gain recognition.

In the Swing Era, most jazz critics were elite white men who had a powerful influence on perceptions of women jazz singers. John Gennari argues that "critics have been among the most important jazz mediators" between musicians and audiences.[23] He says that these jazz critics are so powerful, "even when we occupy the same space as performing musicians, our perceptions of what we are hearing are indelibly, if invisibly, mediated by what we have heard before, including critical discourse."[24] Because white male jazz critics dominated the mainstream print and magazines, as well as major broadcast media, their perspectives were most frequently

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[21] Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," (13). Women singers' musicianship and authenticity was also questioned in genres such as the blues. See also, McGinley, *Staging the Blues*.

[22] The framing of discovery narratives in this context also resonates with Euroamerican histories written about contact between European settlers and Native American peoples. The "Doctrine of Discovery" served as justification for dismissing Native rights and claims to land, allowing Europeans to assert power and possession over Native lands and peoples. See Annette Kolodny, *In Search of First Contact: The Vikings of Vinland, the Peoples of the Dawnland, and the Anglo-American Anxiety of Discovery* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012) and Jean M. O'Brien, *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). While the context is quite different, discovery narratives about women singers also conveyed the power of the "discoverers" (male bandleaders and managers) while presenting the "natural" abilities of singers that needed to be channeled and guided by major music industry players.

[23] Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 13.

[24] Ibid., 4

circulated.[25] General audiences consumed information about women jazz singers from national and local mainstream newspapers, magazines, and radio broadcasts from companies that were white male-controlled and owned. Thus, the potential for singers to express their own perspectives in these sources was quite limited.

Helen Humes' 1981 oral history with Helen Oakley Dance, one of the few female jazz journalists of the twentieth century, offers a different perspective from the "discovery narratives" found in the mainstream press—one that points to an active family resistance to being "launched to success" by men. For Humes, this resistance came in the form of familial protection and an emphasis on education. Despite the dangers of touring the country during war and the years of Jim Crow, singers were often pressured to go on tour with big bands from an early age. Going on tour was an essential way for big bands to spread their music and make money by drawing audiences to ballrooms, hotels, and theaters. Singers acted as a vital connection between the big band and audience, providing both an emotional link through lyrics and an entertaining visual presence on stage (See Chapter 2). As Humes said in her oral history, producer Tommy Rockwell wanted her to go on tour before finishing her schooling. Humes recalled, "He said he wanted me to go on a tour and Mama said, 'she's not going on no tour or nothing because she's going to finish school. After she finishes school, whatever she wants to do, she can do it.'"[26] Humes depicts her mother's valuation of education over touring in a way that emphasizes parental protection, strategic planning for the future, and black middle-class values. Parental approval and guidance were important, as jazz singing was a profession that would take young

[25] A few women like Helen Oakley dance were also jazz writers and producers who had an important impact on the jazz scene. See Monk Rowe, Interview with Helen Oakley Dance, Clinton, New York, Feb. 12, 1998. Fillius Jazz Archive, Hamilton College Library, NY.
[26] Helen Oakley Dance, Interview with Helen Humes. May 12, 1981. Box 58, Folder 1, 32. Jazz Oral History Project, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

singers to night clubs and ballrooms. These places were spaces of intimacy, where bodies would come into contact with one another on the dance floor, and places like jazz clubs had reputations of being hotbeds of vice.[27] In addition, for black musicians, white venue owners' discrimination often created hostile conditions for performers. The only child of Emma Johnson, a schoolteacher, and John Henry Humes, one of the first black lawyers in Louisville, Helen Humes had a protected childhood. Humes said she did not mind waiting to go on tour because, "I didn't know anything about traveling. And I didn't want to be traveling no how because I'd hear them talk about the way they were treated and everything."[28] Humes, as a black blues and jazz singer, heard stories of life on the road from members of a black big band. After the records came out, however, Humes said that everyone at her home encouraged her: "you ought to do, you ought to go.'"[29] Humes' oral history conveys the familial relationships, networks, and contexts that were often erased by discovery narratives.

Though discovery narratives depicted a singer's career success as an immediate shot to stardom while obscuring challenging work conditions, in fact, touring "on the road" was very dangerous for women of color singers. Big bands had to travel constantly to sustain their careers as musicians—an endeavor that was particularly dangerous for African American bands. African American bands in particular faced travel restrictions related to World War II efforts and Jim Crow.[30] During World War II, gas and rubber shortages caused these products to be rationed, which presented challenges for bands with tour buses.[31] In addition, the government restricted travel routes in order to prioritize military movement and placed restrictions on charter buses to

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[27] See Fiona Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).
[28] Dance, Interview with Helen Humes, 32.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 67.
[31] Ibid., 34, 65-66.

conserve commodities, making traveling especially difficult for African American bands.[32] Segregated train travel meant that African Americans could rarely travel by train if they did not own their own train cars: soldiers, people with disabilities, and other white people would board first and fill the seats.[33] Because African Americans were denied access to many performances in hotels, ballrooms, and theaters, as well as to radio broadcasting opportunities, most black bands could only have road trips that lasted one night. Furthermore, they faced the constant threat of racial violence.[34]

Humes' oral history makes clear some of the dangers she initially felt being on the road with the band members, who later turned out to act as her extended family while away from home. Humes recalled about traveling with the Count Basie band:

> Ms. Dance: …And you were the only gal with all the guys?
>
> Ms. Humes: Yeah, all the guys. And you know sometimes I'd have to get off the bus and I'd be scared to get off cause they'd all look out the window. Oh, shucks.[35]

Humes' account conveys her initial fear of the all-male members of the band, especially with the amount of attention they directed at her. However, soon after she got to know them, she stated: "…they treated me like I was a little sister. They were just as sweet as they could be."[36] For Humes, the potentially uncomfortable situation of being a young woman traveling with an all-male band became one of familial comfort.

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[32] Ibid., 35-36.
[33] Ibid., 66-67.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Dance, Interview with Helen Humes, 61.
[36] Ibid.

Humes' oral history also points to her professionalism as a working woman. She presented herself as a laboring performer who served black audiences in the South through her music:

> I used to have a lot of the kids when I'd go down to the South. And you know I always kept my evening dresses on the bus where I could change my clothes. And the different people would come and they would say, 'you know Miss Humes, you're the only singer that comes down here that dresses up for us'. I said, "really?" They said, "usually whatever they have on on the bus, that's what they come out and sing in." …I said, "oh, I don't understand that because we're working for you just like anybody else."[37]

Humes stressed her respect for black audiences during performance tours through her wardrobe, believing that black audiences in the South should receive the same caliber of performance as white audiences.

Humes' oral history also reveals the maternal role that she performed while traveling with an all-male big band on the road, shedding light on gendered and racialized dynamics of the music industry in the 1930s and 1940s as well as the gendered nature of her labor in this context. When she began to tour with Count Basie's band in her mid-twenties, she recounted, "…I treated all of them like they was my children. I was sewing on buttons, you know, and doing up the cooking all the time because, you know, it's kind of hard trying to get food in a lot of places down there. And I'd be fixing lunches."[38] Humes points to the maternal role that she embodied while traveling with Basie's band, taking on traditional homemaking tasks like cooking and sewing that demonstrated her familial relationship to the band. Importantly, Humes'

[37] Ibid., 67.
[38] Ibid., 61-62.

homemaking through food signals that an important need was being met.[39] "Down there"—the South—was especially hostile to black musicians, who would be refused food and service on the basis of race. Once on the road, Humes contributed the labor of a mother to her new family.

Decades after her initial start with big bands, Humes expressed the pull she felt between family responsibilities and the call to the music business. Contrary to Wilson's discovery narratives, Humes' oral history presents memories of how managers sought her out to return to the music scene in the 1970s after her mother had passed and when she was taking care of her ill father. She said, "In '73, Stanley Dance came here to Louisville and he came out to the house and he said, 'Now Helen you've just got to come and sing, we're going this Basie reunion and you've got to be on it.'"[40] She continued, "They sent for me again in '74."[41] According to her oral history, instead of being discovered, bandleaders and other musicians pursued her. Humes revealed the conflict she faced going on tour and leaving her ill father to be cared for by someone else. She said, "I went on and while I was gone he died. I said well, I'll just keep on singing as long as I can."[42] Humes does not present fame or money as the driving forces behind her career, but instead, the honoring of her father's wishes. The focus on familial relationships as the driver behind one's music highlights the significance of these relationships that was often erased in the press.

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[39] Humes' labor in this respect can be viewed as political. Teresa A. Nance advocates for "hearing the missing voice" of black women in the civil rights movement by looking at the range of activities in which they participated. She argues that "critics need to expand their focus and study the meal-making, child-tending, friend-supporting acts of women as rhetorical and capable of serving to advance a number of different social justice movements" (555). Thus Humes' performance of such tasks should be considered significant. See Teresa A. Nance, "Hearing the Missing Voice," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 5 (1996): 543-559.

[40] Interview with Helen Humes, June 12, 1979, Oral History Center, University of Louisville Archives and Records Center, Louisville, Kentucky. http://digital.library.louisville.edu/cdm/ref/collection/afamoh/id/108, 6.

[41] Ibid., 7.

[42] Ibid.

While the mainstream press emphasized how white male managers "discovered" Humes, her oral history underscores that the success she saw importantly included social and familial networks apart from the white male managers. These factors complicate the standard rags-to-riches and often tragic, early-life narratives of women jazz singers that dominate public memory.[43] Humes' oral history demonstrates the significance of influences often excluded from singers' success stories in the mainstream press—stories that show the integral role of black communities and families. Humes continued this emphasis on family by creating an extended kinship "on the road," performing gendered labor and enacting a maternal role in her relationships with the band members. These relationships promoted racial solidarity in the face of violence and discrimination through gendered affective labor. By presenting black communities with sophisticated working womanhood and performing high-quality shows for black audiences, she transmitted familial and community care through her performances. The labor of networking and counter-obligations also proved to be vital to her success.

"Coming-of-Age" Stories, the Black Press and Race on the Radio

Thelma Carpenter performed music and appeared in film, on television, and on radio, boasting a seven-decade long career. Carpenter was born on January 15, 1922, in Brooklyn, New York, and performed from the 1930s until the 1990s. The black press framed Carpenter's early career differently from the discovery narratives found in the mainstream press by articulating "coming-of-age" stories in which she achieved upward mobility despite racism in the music

[43] Writing about Josephine Baker, sociologist Bennetta Jules-Rosette deems these narratives "black Cinderella stories with tragic undertones" and argues that these narratives have emerged frequently in stories told about Baker, Billie Holiday, and Dorothy Dandridge (55). See Bennette Jules-Rosette, "Two Loves: Josephine Baker as Icon and Image," *Emergences: Journal for the Study of Media & Composite Cultures* 10, no. 1 (2000): 55-77.

industry and radio. The black press depicted various events as important experiences leading up to Carpenter's success, including her mother's job as a dancer in clubs, her participation in amateur competitions and radio, and her music training in high school. In contrast to the mainstream press, the black press commented on the racial and gender politics of the music industry, expressed traditional modes of respectable womanhood in order to promote racial uplift, and emphasized Carpenter's involvements on the radio in the 1930s and 1940s as a way to rise above racism. Jane Rhodes has argued that the black press and black cinema were "critical sites for instructing black women, especially those in the working class, on deportment, sexuality, and moral values."[44] In a similar way, Carpenter's coming-of-age stories in the black press contributed to a larger project of racial uplift and respectability politics while also critiquing racism in the music industry.

The black press had grown substantially in the early twentieth century and expressed ideas about how to navigate racism while also promoting the politics of respectability, especially for black working-class women. As Rhodes points out, "It was the rapidly growing weekly black press that most effectively reached and influenced a mass, working-class audience. These publications, sold on the streets of Harlem, Chicago, Pittsburgh, and other American cities rather than through subscriptions, offered their readers entertainment, critical economic and political intelligence, and instructions in how to navigate the challenges of Jim Crow."[45] These newspapers also preached modesty for women and upward mobility achieved through female respectability.[46] Two decades later, black magazines such as *Ebony*, *Our World*, and *Jet* emerged

[44] See Jane Rhodes, "Pedagogies of Respectability: Race, Media, and Black Womanhood in the Early 20th Century," *Souls* 18, no. 2-4 (2016): 201-214.
[45] Ibid., 205.
[46] Ibid., 201. Rhodes traces how black newspapers like *Chicago Defender* and others became "key advocates of respectability politics," and how editors and founders like Robert Abbot

to share stories about black life, achievements, and contemporary topics with photographs, and they often featured celebrities and musicians.[47] The magazines were widely circulated and read in black communities. While both black newspapers and magazines commented on racial politics, they expressed similar messages about upward mobility and respectability through the women singers they included in their articles.

In articles about Carpenter's success, some black magazines drew attention to the ways in which singers were seen as commodities. For example, an October 1951 issue of *Our World* magazine, an African American magazine, included an article titled "59 inches of Dynamite" that described Carpenter's entry to the music world in the following way: "Her mother was a night club dancer. After winning an Amateur Hour contest at 14, she went into Willie Bryant's band while still going to High School. At her first night club date at the "Black Cat" in New York's Greenwich Village, John Hammond heard her and snapped her up for Teddy Wilson's band."[48] John Hammond, the same prominent American jazz record producer who "discovered" Helen Humes, is described as "snapping up" Carpenter—as if she were available for purchase. Women jazz singers were frequently seen as possessions during the era of big bands. Bandleaders, record producers, and managers sought new talent, and there was also a large supply of so-called "girl singers."[49] The *Our World* article draws attention to the politics of the music industry that allowed white male managers to dictate the careers of women of color

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viewed themselves "…as arbiters of the limits of respectable public behavior and members of an unofficial policing mechanism for the black community" (206).

[47] African American Studies: Newspapers & Magazines, Research Guides, University of Southern California Libraries. http://libguides.usc.edu/africanamericanstudies/blackpapers

[48] "59 Inches of Dynamite," *Our World*, Oct. 1951, 53-55. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

[49] Lawrence McClellan, *The Later Swing Era, 1942-1955* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2004), 106.

singers by rapidly replacing them with new talent. Critiques of the music industry emerge even through the subtle words chosen to represent the stories of these singers.

Our World also highlights a narrative of upward mobility, noting that although Carpenter's mother was "a night club dancer," Carpenter achieved success as a musician while still attending high school—a respectable path to fame and success. Professions such as night club dancer could be stigmatized, but were also some of the limited options for employment for black women in the early twentieth century. For some women, singing and dancing careers provided a route out of poverty and a career other than the restricted options available to them in Jim Crow America.[50] To achieve upward mobility, education was also key; the article emphasizes the importance of education for Carpenter and her family, reflecting black middle-class values. Carpenter had been born in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, with a majority white population and by the 1920s, a flood of Russian Jews, Italians, and other European immigrants. Surrounding neighborhoods of Bedford-Stuyvesant and Crown Heights saw large numbers of African Americans arriving from the South by the 1930s.[51] Until 1939, Carpenter attended The Girls' Commercial High School (later renamed Prospect Heights High School) in Brooklyn, NY. Constructed in the 1920s, it served a majority white population, and offered a better education than most African Americans received in New York. Many girls of color worked to support their families, and schools in parts of New York like Harlem that served predominantly black communities were rundown and overcrowded, lacking services and updated curriculum.[52] In addition, only about fifty percent of girls of color were enrolled in school in the 1920s and

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[50] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 55. As Tucker points out, "Many black women chose careers as musicians over spending their lives as domestic workers or sharecroppers" (55).
[51] Cynthia Danza, "Prospect Heights Historic District Designation Report," New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, Jun. 23, 2009. 22.
[52] Lauri Johnson, "A Generation of Women Activists: African American Female Educators in Harlem, 1930-1950," *The Journal of African American History* 89, no. 3 (Summer 2004): 224.

1930s.[53] By contrast, *Our World* charted Carpenter's pathway to upward mobility through education and music, framing her as a role model.

Press releases, published by booking agencies to promote clients and generate profit[54] sometimes attributed Carpenter's success to her proactive behaviors and drive to succeed, even as they undercut the compliment with a reference to "luck." These press releases are important because they were often the sources for articles that circulated in the black press.[55] One press release, reported, "Thelma made her 'debut' in show business when only nine. A letter written to amateur hour conductor Jack Darrell in her childish scrawl won her a chance to sing sight unseen. She was an immediate hit and broadcasted on the show for six months."[56] The description shows Carpenter as a precocious child, lucky enough to catch the attention of a radio host. The text continues: "Purely on a dare she entered an amateur contest at Harlem theatre and won, thereby getting a week's engagement. Several bookers heard her and signed her immediately."[57] This description also tells her success story as one of fast-paced happenstance and luck: one dare led to a chain of events that enabled her success. The press release suggested that if black individuals were lucky and worked hard enough, they could succeed. Press releases promoted this narrative in presenting Carpenter as a role model.

An integral part of Carpenter's early career success was her performance in the amateur contest at Apollo Theater, which signaled larger support of the black music community in Harlem. Though minimized in the press release, Carpenter's performance at the 1938 Apollo

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[53] Thomas D. Snyder, ed., *120 Years of American Education: A Statistical Portrait* (Collingdale: DIANE Publishing, 1993), 6.
[54] See Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 105-106.
[55] Ibid., 80-81.
[56] "Thelma Carpenter's Rise to the Top: A Story of Opportunity's Knock Answered." 1945-1965. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[57] Ibid.

Theater's "Amateur Night" was invaluable to her career success. The Apollo was a space that often functioned as a "make or break" destination for black musicians.[58] The theater's significance becomes clear in some of reviews of the Apollo Theater from that time. A U.S. Works Project Administration document by Dorothy West in 1938 describes the rigorous standards to which black performers were held: "A Negro show would rather have the plaudits of an Apollo audience than any other applause. For the Apollo is the hard, testing ground of negro show business, and approval there can make or break an act."[59] Other musicians, too, recalled the challenges of winning over audiences at the Apollo.[60] Carpenter's performance as the Apollo clearly had much at stake for her, and included a great deal of labor leading up to the event. The notion of the contest being "amateur" signals unpaid labor of a hobby pursued for leisure. However, aspiring musicians frequented amateur contests such as this one in hopes of being signed and pursuing a professional career—but often also to earn the approval of the community. Carpenter's success at this performance is one way in which black musicians were launched to success—a "coming-of-age" story at the Apollo Theater. Other singers, such as Etta Jones,

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[58] Gennari, *Blowin' Hot and Cool*, 11-12. Gennari points out the jazz "criticism" that was part of black social life: "There's never been a more efficient form of community criticism than amateur night at the Apollo Theater, where performers who can't cut the mustard are unceremoniously booed off the stage while those who do are ecstatically embraced" (11-12).

[59] West, Dorothy. 1938. "Amateur Night." New York City, New York. Manuscript/Mixed Material. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/wpalh001719/. (Accessed March 19, 2017). Even today, the Apollo Theater promotes this image as rigorous testing ground for new talent. Its website states: "Amateur Night at the Apollo is one of New York's most popular live entertainment experiences, attracting performers and audiences the world over. The classic competition is known for its notoriously 'tough' audience, gleefully deciding who will 'be good or be gone' to win the grand prize. Who will be the next Ella Fitzgerald, James Brown or Michael Jackson?" See "Amateur Night at the Apollo," accessed July 5, 2018. https://www.apollotheater.org/amateur-night/.

[60] In her oral history, Etta Jones recalled, "The Apollo was real scary because they would boo you off in a minute…[my friends] talked me into going and I went and I sang and I did not win, on the contrary to what some folks thought. They almost booed me off, because I started in the wrong key" (3). See Monk Rowe, Interview with Etta Jones, Clinton, New York, Oct. 2, 1998. Fillius Jazz Archive, Hamilton College Library, NY.

recalled the Apollo Theater performances as being inspirational and central to their future success.[61]

The transition from youth on a radio show to the singer of a prominent band or orchestra was often framed as a coming-of-age story that exemplified a path to upward mobility and racial integration through music. One publicity report on Carpenter stated, "Thelma Carpenter has been delighting sophisticated audiences since 1939 when she made the transition from 'kiddie star' on the *Horn & Hardart Children's Hour* to big band singer with the Teddy Wilson Orchestra."[62] For many singers, performing on the radio was a conventional avenue to a job in a big band. Women singers used available technologies of the radio to be heard, sometimes while earning wages for their performances on the airwaves. As the publicity report makes clear, it was getting picked up by Teddy Wilson's Orchestra that was Carpenter's route to "delighting sophisticated audiences," pointing to a shift from child programming to performances for those able to appreciate jazz orchestra (read: upper-middle classes). Wilson, a jazz pianist and bandleader known for his elegant style and his ability to "swing," was one of the first black musicians to play regularly with white bands, famously appearing with Benny Goodman's integrated trio in 1935. Carpenter's association with Wilson served as a connection to upward mobility, an avenue to play in racially integrated places, and an engagement in sophisticated performances of jazz orchestras.

Many articles in the black press about Carpenter highlighted her work on the radio, complicating the picture of a lily-white "golden age" of radio. Though radio was seen as a

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[61] Etta Jones remembered seeing Billie Holiday at the Apollo Theater: "And when I heard Billie Holiday that was just the end. I just said oh my God, it was haunting to me. It was just…I just wanted to be a singer" (2). See Monk Rowe, Interview with Etta Jones.

[62] "Thelma Carpenter Bio." Johnathan Craig Media Relations. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

"color-blind medium," scholars have shown the racism that persisted on radio during the 1930s and 1940s, which sought to erase black voices and bodies.[63] Yet the black press reported Carpenter's radio performances as highly politicized confrontations of the racial inequalities present in the industry, and they positioned her as an active advocate for racial equality. Carpenter both spoke and sang on the radio, and black newspapers described her resistance to performing stereotypes of African Americans as was sometimes requested by scripts on *The Eddie Cantor Pabst Blue Ribbon Show*.[64]

Some black-run newspapers and magazines actively worked against "discovery narratives" to draw attention to the gendered and racialized politics of show business, particularly in radio. Pushing back against representations of black musicians in the mainstream press, they replaced white discovery narratives with success narratives based on hard work and endurance. A 1946 article in *Ebony* titled "Cantor and Kaye Break Radio Rules to Star Negroes" features Thelma Carpenter as one of its central figures. The "Radio & Race" section begins with a large photo of Eddie Cantor singing alongside Thelma Carpenter at a radio microphone. The caption to the photograph reads, "Eddie Cantor Joins His New 'Discovery' Thelma Carpenter in a Duet over the NBC Network." As previously discussed, the quotations around "discovery" signal a self-consciousness regarding this method of framing success stories and new artistic partnerships. The article goes on to describe that "radio is growing up in race relations" and articulates the ongoing violence against black people in America.[65] After tracing some of the changes in radio that had recently enabled performers to break out of "stereotype

[63] Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 234.
[64] David Weinstein, *The Eddie Cantor Story: A Jewish Life in Performance and Politics* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 183-184.
[65] "Cantor and Kaye Break Radio Rules to Star Negroes." January 1946, 43. *Ebony*. Robert Peck Collection, Box 6, Folder 3, University of Chicago Library, Special Collections Research Center.

straightjackets," the article comments on two of the most popular radio shows on air: the Eddie Cantor show and the Danny Kaye show. The article states:

> Stepping into the spot which skyrocketed Dina [sic] Shore to fame is Thelma Carpenter, who is billed as Eddie's 'new singing discovery.' Pert, sultry-voiced Thelma is no new 'discovery' by any means (she was with Count Basie's band and on the night club circuit) but Eddie's decency and spunk in defying lily-white radio customs is something very new. On the Eddie Cantor show, Thelma Carpenter is a singer, not a Negro. Occasionally Cantor's dialogue slips back into the race mold but Thelma's singing overshadows these lapses. She has been a sensational hit, won plaudits of fans and critics alike with zingy renditions of old-timers like *I Can't Give You Anything But Love*.[66]

The article undermines the narrative of a white man "discovering" the talent of a black woman to present a new story about Carpenter while paying attention to racial politics at play. The article praises Cantor for breaking stereotypes and allowing black performers to present themselves and their art in a dignified way, but still points to his flaws (his "dialogue slips back into the race mold").[67] It also draws attention to Carpenter's identity as a singer who is dignified and respected; her ability to sing and her identity as a singer allow her to transcend barriers of race to perform competitively in the radio industry. While Cantor, as a white man, still returns to stereotyping at times, this article highlights Carpenter's ability to transcend racism through her performances. In the 1930s and 1940s white-owned businesses in the entertainment industry provided few opportunities for black women aside from the stereotypes of the hypersexualized jezebel, the maid or mammy, and the tragic mulatta.[68] While this example in *Ebony* may be read

[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 8.

as part of a political agenda of "respectability politics" which presented narrow images of black female norms, it still points to the active engagement of the black female performer in being able to push back against racism through the radio.

Carpenter's success story was crafted in different ways depending on media source and intended audience. Some black magazines like *Our World* drew attention to cases of upward mobility while also giving subtle critique of the racial politics of the music industry; in contrast, press releases sometimes depicted a combination of hard work and right circumstances as the key success for women singers. Mentions of certain performance venues like the Apollo Theater could add a certain kind of legitimacy to a performer's reputation. Often the success pathways for black women singers at the theater or on radio shows were framed as coming-of-age narratives. These narratives worked to naturalize black singers' success in big bands in order promote pathways to upward mobility through the pursuit of music. Singers such as Carpenter were then framed as community role models and active agents with the power to combat racial discrimination once they achieved success.

Romantic Success Narratives: Desire, Acceptable Public Womanhood, and White Women in the Mainstream Press

White women jazz singers' success stories differed from those of black women singers because the mainstream press often placed emphasis on their romantic relationships and marriages with bandleaders, managers, or band members. This brand of the romance narrative of success put women's sexuality at the forefront, and fostered a sense of intimacy for audiences. The stories also served to make women singers accepted in public spaces that had previously been designated "all-male." Specifically, the stories permitted a white woman's presence in the

masculinized space of the big band on stage, while also giving her a place to exist "on the road" with a big band—a space frequently coded as male. As a singer, her existence within the jazz scene, also a masculine space, was deemed acceptable, but her position, labor, and musicianship were often trivialized.

Romantic success stories frequently appeared in the mainstream press and promoted ideas of stardom, passion, and intimacy as part of the exciting adventures of women jazz singers during their careers. Coverage of Louise Tobin's early career often focused on her marriage to trumpet player and bandleader Harry James, for instance. Tobin was sixteen when she married James in Millerton, New York. While the two initially planned to marry in Tulsa, Oklahoma, while on tour with the Art Hicks Band, state laws prohibited the marriage based on Louise's age.[69] Tobin remembered James reminding her en route to the justice's office: "Remember now, you're eighteen and you were born in 1917."[70] As Tobin became more successful, newspapers and magazines increasingly commented on her relationship with James.

Authors in the mainstream press constructed romantic success narratives in conjunction with ideas of acceptable public womanhood. Tucker has argued that notions of womanhood—especially with respect to glamour and femininity—remained constant from the 1930s to the 1950s, describing how it was necessary for women in groups like *The Hour of Charm* to perform "labor masqueraded as leisure."[71] In addition to an emphasis on how women's bodies were expected to look, acceptable public womanhood also included what roles women could play in public, what careers women could have, and how women's labor could be recognized. In the

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[69] "Louise Tobin and Harry James on wedding day." May 1935. The Louise Tobin and Peanuts Hucko Jazz Collection. Northeast Texas Digital Collections. Texas A&M University Commerce. Commerce, TX.
[70] Peter J. Levinson, *Trumpet Blues: The Life of Harry James* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.)
[71] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 89.

stories about Louise Tobin, ideas about acceptable public womanhood came in the form of Tobin's looks, details about her marriage, her role as musician's wife and later, mother, and the bands with which she could perform.

Romantic success narratives often depicted traditional, heterosexual gender roles, with men acting as breadwinners and women as devoted wives and mothers. These types of narratives became important in combating anxieties over gender that arose in the 1930s, and they re-asserted heteronormative relationships in the celebrity realm through stories of white men and white women.[72] As Allison McCracken points out, "White men in the public spotlight… were expected to be representatives of the dominant culture and to uphold the values of white supremacy through recognizable active, productive masculine behavior."[73] White male jazz musicians had power based on their gender, race, and status as musicians. Marriages depicted through romantic success stories were significant because they presented women singers as both desirable and conquerable while asserting heterosexual ideas about the nuclear family, especially heading into the 1950s.

Marrying a woman vocalist within the band was an assertion of power that was made public through the press. This male assertion of power also restricted the woman singer to the position of object that was often "found" by the bandleader, manager, or other musician in the band. There were many examples of marriages between women singers and band members, managers, arrangers, and bandleaders: Stan Kenton and Ann Richards, Frank De Vol and Helen O'Connell, Don Glasser and Lois Costello, to name a few. Charlie Barnet was reported as being married to at least three different singers, including singer Betty Reilly, with eleven marriages

[72] See McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*.
[73] Ibid., 4.

overall.[74] These marriages were often the focus of articles in the mainstream press and were framed in ways that promoted male power.

The presentation of romantic success narratives came at the expense of women singers' reputations and the labor they put into their careers. While singers' positions were regularly trivialized by jazz critics' opinions, widely circulated in music magazines and newspapers, the framing of romantic success stories was one way in which women singers were simultaneously adored and derided.[75] Women jazz singers' romantic success stories created a dual effect on the audience: the singers saw a great deal of popularity, admiration, and fame while also being persistently critiqued and undermined when it came to musical ability and vocal talent, sometimes due to their gender and/or the fact that their success was seen as enabled by men—and by their husbands in particular.

As bandleaders and managers realized the monetary value of "girl singers" on stage, they became an essential part of the big band ensemble while simultaneously given trivializing labels that limited their ability to be taken seriously as musicians and laborers. As Linda Dahl has described the role of women singers of big bands: "Universally called the "girl singer" (and, for variety, "chirper," "torcher," "crooner," "warbler" or "canary"), she was like a singing cheerleader for the team behind her in uniform…Almost always she was the lone woman in the band, conspicuous in her party clothes against a field of serious, suited males."[76] While some of these nicknames, such as "crooner," "chirper," and "canary," were associated with the voice, for women, they very quickly came to signify women's positions as easily dismissible, highly visual, big-band accessories. Women became a type, and did not have much power. Yet the valuable

[74] Larry Harnish, "Orchestra Wives," *Los Angeles Times*, 2007.
[75] See Licia Fiol-Matta, *The Great Woman Singer: Gender and Voice in Puerto Rican Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
[76] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 122.

central function of women jazz singers was to appear as "eye candy" for the audience. As a 1938 *Swing Magazine* stated, "Ask any ten bandleaders as to their pet headache…nine will answer 'girl vocalists.'…[But] you can't deny that a beautiful girl in front of a mike looks pretty good to the paying males."[77] Women singers were understood to be onstage for their beauty and not for their singing.

Given the value of women singers on stage, romantic success stories were framed in ways that privileged looks over voice. Like other media coverage of women singers in the 1930s and 1940s, romantic success narratives found in mainstream newspapers and magazines typically featured a large image of the (white) female body, often glamorous and sexualized. For example, a 1939 article titled "Benny Returns to Coast for Expo Date; New Radio Series on NBC" features a large photo of Tobin. Tobin appears smiling, with hair curled and wearing a feminine, frilly top with skinny straps.[78] Despite the bulk of the article containing information about band changes and performances of Benny Goodman—one of the most popular swing bands of the time—the visual focus remains on the image of Tobin, projecting a pleasurable, consumable fantasy for the audience. This presentation allowed the audience to simultaneously fantasize about the woman singer through images while also understanding her career as a singer as part of an acceptable, safe, heteronormative presentation of womanhood. Large, highly sexualized pictures of women singers, often accompanied text that focused on all-male bands, only included a small snippet of text or a short caption to describe the women in the photos. The frequency of these images demonstrates a focus on beauty and looks for women jazz singers and conveys the

[77] Ibid., 121.
[78] "Benny Returns to Coast for Expo Date; New Radio Series on NBC," July 1939. File Box 109, Folder 1, MSS 53, The Benny Goodman Papers in the Irving S. Gilmore Music Library of Yale University.

necessity for women singers to present themselves as glamorous, desirable, and sexually available (at least for the eyes).

Romantic success stories also pointed to the economic challenges faced by musicians during the Great Depression while depicting conditions "on the road" that could sometimes challenge a marriage. A 1944 publication titled "Harry James Pin-Up Life Story" by Frank Stacy of Arco Publishing Company focused on promoting Harry James's major life events, which included his career path and aspirations, his love life, and his participation in various musical ensembles. The "Harry Marries" section describes the story behind his marriage to Louise Tobin:

> …he had met and married a girl named Louise Tobin who came from Denton, Texas. Louise had won a singing contest and as a reward got an engagement at a theater in Texas. Harry was playing in the pit during the show. They met, fell in love and were married in Millertown, New York in 1935. Later, when Harry had to go out on the road with Benny's band, Louise was left alone in New York and came out of singing retirement to take a job at Nick's, a Greenwich Village night spot where she worked with Bobby Hackett and his jazzmen.[79]

Tobin's success story is placed next to a serendipitous romance narrative story, which was severed by James' career that had him performing "on the road." During this time, women were expected to quit their careers upon marriage to have children and tend to their husbands, especially if their husband was employed. As Elaine Tyler May has pointed out, "A 1936 Gallup poll indicated that 82 percent of those surveyed (including three-fourths of the woman) believed

[79] Frank Stacy, "Harry James Pin-Up Life Story." Copyright 1944 by Arco Publishing Company. Rutgers Harry James Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

that wives of employed husbands should not work outside the home."[80] However, Tobin had to come out of "singing retirement" to work due to the economic conditions of the Great Depression (after she was "left alone in New York"). James' departure is depicted as a career necessity that was responsible for getting Tobin back on the music scene.

The gender and sexual politics of the 1940s music industry necessitated careful maneuvering of married celebrities who performed in big bands to increase profits. For couples like Tobin and James, their positions as female singer and male bandleader, respectively, demanded they perform in separate groups due to the music industry's gender and sexual politics that prioritized musicians' desirability for audiences. After the couple began to see success separately, it was frowned upon for the two to perform together. Stacy's 1944 article comments on the performance conditions for Tobin and James: "It's an ironic twist that when James first formed his own orchestra, the men advising him decided that it wouldn't be wise to have his wife, Louise, handle the vocal chores. Another girl was hired instead. Later Mrs. James was signed to sing with Benny Goodman's orchestra."[81] Stacy's depiction of James' orchestra formation hints at a complicated and ironic romance narrative: though Tobin and James were married, "the men advising" James in his next career step sought to separate the two. It was considered undesirable for them to perform in the same orchestra due to potential drama that could ensue (James was a known womanizer), but also because the two of them could increase their marketability as celebrities by appearing separately, therefore bolstering bands' profits. Though Tobin's image and marriage were widely publicized and circulated, her presence on a different stage (that of Benny Goodman's) ensured that James would remain desirable to

[80] Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).
[81] Stacy, "Harry James Pin-Up Life Story."

audiences as the central bandleader and Tobin would remain as girl singer "eye candy" for other audiences. While the article's use of the phrase "vocal chores" makes the labor of women singers visible, the phrase also describes the girl singer's function as trite, tedious, and menial.

These choices of maneuvering the presentation of bandleaders and singers were largely made by publicists. By the late 1930s, booking agencies served as a vital connection between the bands, venues, radio networks, and commercial sponsors, and they were also in charge of the publicity for the bands.[82] As the politics of the music industry began to shift, bandleaders had less say over financial and publicity choices. Marketing decisions further shifted to booking agencies, who had the economic power to widely promote their clients. Agents circulated press releases to magazines and newspapers, crafted stories about musicians and bandleaders to be published in trade magazines, and sought to include clients in journalists' columns.[83] They also set up photoshoots and publicity events at stores, and found ways to rapidly disperse promotional materials like brochures and photographs, contributing to the increasing commodification of women singers in the late 1940s and into the 1950s.[84]

Some articles presented women singers as exceptional for being able to pursue both domestic duties as wives and singing careers, which were made possible through the men they married. For example, one July 1939 article described Louise Tobin's marriage and performance abilities. This article points out that it is coincidental that Tobin could engage in artistic endeavors beyond her marriage—not just act as a wife. The title above Tobin's photo reads, "She Can Sing, Too!" The title signals the idea that Tobin's main role was her position as Harry James' wife; her ability to sing surfaced as an added benefit. Tobin's status in Goodman's band

[82] See Stowe, *Swing Changes*.
[83] Ibid., 106.
[84] Ibid.

was supposed to be temporary. An excerpt from the article section titled "Louise Remains" reads, "Louise Tobin, who joined the band to substitute for Martha Tilton when the latter became ill, will continue to hold the spot of featured vocalist, Martha having decided to remain on the Coast and work as a solo attraction."[85] Women singers frequently replaced one another, and it was Tobin's status as Harry James' wife that likely got her the gig. The caption under the close-up photo of Tobin reads, "Benny's new singer. In private life she is Mrs. Harry James, wife of BG's former trumpet star, now heading his own band."[86] The caption draws attention to the public/private split to which women jazz singers were expected to adhere. In public, Tobin was to be perceived primarily as "Benny's new singer," and it was understood that she would also function as "eye candy" for the audience. In her private life, however, Tobin was expected to be a dutiful wife. The caption below Tobin's image focuses on the possession of the two men ("Benny's new singer" and "Mrs. Harry James"), and centralizes their careers ("…BG's former trumpet star, now heading his own band."). Tobin's career success is displaced by the choices and careers of male musicians, effectively serving to erase her own experiences, labor, and background.

Tobin's later interviews that describe her experiences with big bands reveal the gendered politics of the music industry in which women had to navigate bandleaders' policing of the romantic relationships of their singers and band members. For example, in 2011 interview with Spencer "Wolf" Smartt, Tobin describes Benny Goodman's choices to hire and fire women vocalists based on marriage status and interactions with bandleaders in quite different ways than many newspapers:

[85] "Benny Returns to Coast for Expo Date."
[86] Ibid.

Smartt: [Benny Goodman] had a rule that the band members weren't allowed to date or socialize with the vocalists, wasn't that right?

Tobin: That's what I heard, because I think that's the primary reason that he let Martha Tilton go, because she married his band manager Leonard Vannerson…I was not told that specifically by Benny, but the fact is that when he found that I was married to Harry it didn't seem to make any difference because I was not involved—I think he probably liked that because he didn't want his girl singers to get involved with musicians.[87]

Tobin describes how former vocalist Marta Tilton's relationship with her band manager, not her illness as was reported in other publicity pages, caused her to get fired. This example demonstrates how Benny Goodman attempted to police relationships within his band. Because Harry James and Louise Tobin were already married when Tobin was asked to join Goodman's band, and because James was starting his own independent band, Tobin's status as a married woman was seen as a safe bet. Tobin's description of Goodman's employment practices demonstrates the challenging position in which women singers were placed.

As demonstrated, romantic success narratives in the mainstream press had many functions, with most serving to undermine women jazz singers' labor and reputations. By centralizing singers' bodies and sexuality, these narratives elicited desire and fantasy for the audience while also solidifying singers' positions as "visual accessories." These narratives were important because they made married women's place in the public acceptable and "safe" to audiences and they supported ideas about acceptable womanhood for married women. Romantic success narratives could also bolster the power of male bandleaders and managers by asserting their romantic relationships in positive and desirable ways. Focusing on how romantic success

[87] Spencer "Wolf" Smartt, "The Lady who Discovered Sinatra," Jan. 8, 2011. EnnerJazz. Dallas, TX.

narratives have operated gives insight into the ways in which women jazz singers' careers have been crafted and minimized in the written jazz archive.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how success stories about the early careers of women jazz singers emerged through predictable narratives in the dominant archive, showing how some of the stories and contributions of singers like Humes, Carpenter, and Tobin were minimized and erased. The mainstream and black press constructed their narratives differently, and the narratives served to complicate, promote, and at many times, undermine the power and labor of women jazz singers. The dominant narratives in the written jazz archive continue to hold a great deal of power. It is thus crucial to centralize the self-representations and oral histories of women jazz singers because, as Taylor says, "If performance did not transmit knowledge, only the literate and powerful could claim social memory and identity."[88] Singers' performances—framed and unframed, on and off the stage—projected new versions of subjectivity through their own tactics and self-representations. These performances provide a way to understand women's lives in larger historical memory. This is especially important because jazz critics and cultural authorities controlled much of the archival material about women, and especially about women of color. Reading alternative sources and theorizing singers' stories differently while "listening for gender" can challenge existing boundaries of jazz as well as silences in the jazz archives. The performances of women big band singers expand jazz history by conveying singers' complex gendered and racialized experiences to become visible as contributors to jazz history. Their performances complicate and actively push against the existing media sources in the archive that

[88] Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, xvii.

minimize their contributions and promote white male power. In doing so, they draw attention to the gender, racial, and sexual politics of jazz in the past and present.

Chapter 2

From "Utility Singer" to Solo Stardom: Kay Starr and the Politics of Authenticity

Introduction

In December of 1946, an article in *Band Leaders and Record Review* titled "Kay Isn't Commercial" took a strong stance on singer Kay Starr and her music. The article assessing Starr stated, "More than once she has been told that her voice is great—then advised to develop a more commercial style…a style for which sponsors would part with fat wads of lettuce."[1] The author goes on to declare: "But Kay isn't commercial. She still sings the songs she loves, in the only way she cares to sing them."[2] Starr, a jazz and popular singer who gained fame during the late 1930s and early 1940s, found herself enmeshed in debates about authenticity and musicianship.

In American music circles during the 1930s and 1940s, the so-called "commercial style" to which the author refers signified a sense of disingenuous musical engagement on the part of the singer. Debates over the "authenticity" of women jazz singers came from the idea that "truthful music came from outside the marketplace"—a notion about "folk" music and "race" music promoted in the early 20th century by scholars, artists, and the record industry.[3] By the 1920s, singers' "authenticity" was frequently dependent upon their ability to present themselves as "natural" singers who were "non-commercial" in their music. While being "non-commercial"

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[1] "Kay Isn't Commercial," *Band Leaders and Record Review*, December 1946. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). 2, 6. Miller points out that the categories of "folk" and "race" emerged through a historical process involving different key players: "Through a process I call segregating sound, a variety of people—scholars and artists, industrialists and consumers—came to compartmentalize southern music according to race" (2).

was an important prerequisite for "authenticity," most singers of big bands were, in fact, trying to make a living to support themselves, and were thereby embedded in the marketplace. Appearing "commercial" to critics and to the public, however, was an immense obstacle to being seen as a true jazz musician—an obstacle that some singers, including Kay Starr, tried to combat through their image and music performances.

Race and gender figured prominently in debates over musicians' commercialism and authenticity, particularly for women jazz singers who embodied racialized and gendered sounds through their voices and bodies. As Robin D.G. Kelley has argued, labels such as "authentic" are socially constructed and serve to reproduce power relations that sustain hierarchies like those of race and gender.[4] The ability of women jazz singers in big bands to sound "natural" was central to their performances of authenticity. Sounding authentic had to do with embodying the blues, an African American tradition coded by the 1920s as "sounding black."[5] Performing authenticity in jazz was a difficult task for women musicians of any kind, as women in jazz music were frequently cast as inauthentic based on their gender even as they skillfully performed in both instrumental and vocal capacities from the late 1890s onward. The quality and authenticity of women musicians was hotly debated in music magazines of the 1930s and 1940s.

Jazz has been largely understood in terms of a black-white binary: early music historians racialized jazz as "black" with its origins in the late nineteenth-century blues tradition and "white" with the widespread popularity of white swing bands in the 1930s. Many black bands of the 1920s, including those of Duke Ellington, Fletcher Henderson, Bennie Moten, among others, had begun the trend towards large ensembles that "swung," and as white musicians like Glenn

[4] Robin D.G. Kelley, "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Folk,'" *The American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (1992): 1400-1408.
[5] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 6.

Miller, Benny Goodman, the Dorsey Brothers, and Artie Shaw continued the trend, "big bands" began to grow in popularity.[6] White bands frequently used arrangements from black musicians and bandleaders, and as they did so, they acquired fame and publicity.[7] Jazz music made a turn towards the commercial, appealing to a white middle-class audience. Due to this dominant history, jazz and its racialization has been constructed in a black-white binary, despite the ongoing presence of "Other colors in jazz."[8] Because of the black-white binary, the presence and contributions of Asians, Latinos, Indigenous peoples and others in jazz are often erased.[9] Further, the black-white binary is connected to issues of authenticity, as racial identity was a central feature in the struggles over jazz and its meanings. As a self-identified Native American-Irish jazz singer, Kay Starr's racial identity, body, and voice complicated the black-white binary in jazz and became intertwined with debates over authenticity and commercialism that operated in conjunction with race, class, and gender hierarchies.

Although Native Americans' contributions to jazz have largely disappeared from public memory, in fact, Native American and Native American mixed-race musicians have a long history as jazz musicians. Building from Philip Deloria, John Carlos Perea has argued that Native musicians have had an "unexpected" presence in jazz music that challenges music history as we know it.[10] Native musicians such as Mildred Bailey, Oscar Pettiford, and Jim Pepper were major figures in American popular culture, asserting power and agency in their musical presence and

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[6] Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 85.
[7] Ibid., 86. Some of those black musicians who made these arrangements included Fletcher Henderson, Mary Lou Williams, Don Redman, and many others.
[8] Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance," 67. For discussion of Native Americans in jazz, see Ron Welburn, "Native Americans in Jazz, Blues, and Popular Music" in Gabrielle Tayac, *IndiVisible: African-Native American lives in the Americas*, 201-209 (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian, 2009).
[9] Ibid. See also Fellezs, "Silenced but Not Silent: Asian Americans and Jazz," 69-108.
[10] John-Carlos Perea, *Intertribal Native American Music in the United States: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 91, 99.

influencing national and international jazz circuits.[11] Several historians of Native American history have argued that Native Americans did not merely assimilate into dominant white culture, as directed by federal policy from the late nineteenth century; instead, they performed mainstream culture as a survival tactic while creating their own meanings through popular culture practices such as music and film-making.[12] Others were pressured to pass or assimilate just to survive.[13] Kay Starr's performances provide a window into these realities. She continually asserted her Native American identity to the press as she engaged in jazz and popular music and critiqued the myth of Native disappearance, yet on occasion, she also enacted the assimilation required to succeed in the popular music world. This assimilation often came in the form of performing upper-middle-class values of femininity, glamour, and domesticity, or through performing a Southern regional, working-class hillbilly identity.

This chapter shows how Kay Starr's race, class, and participation in multiple music genres made her a versatile performer. Her performances also produced anxiety among jazz critics, recording professionals, bandleaders, and musicians—most of whom were male and white—about her place as a female singer in the world of jazz. Jazz critics, journalists, and historians alike commented on Starr's racial background and the "authenticity" of her music and performances, often while displaying photographs of Starr either in glamorous poses or performing traditional gender roles (in the home, serving as "hostess," or with her child, etc.).

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[11] Ibid., 91-92.

[12] See John W. Troutman, *Indian Blues: American Indians and the Politics of Music, 1879–1934*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), and Philip Joseph Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

[13] See Welburn, "Native Americans in Jazz, Blues, and Popular Music." Welburn says, "While the involvement of indigenous Americans in this quintessentially American music is extensive, the Native identity of musicians commonly believed to be black or white still provokes wonder and contention. As to verifying Indian identity, from the Removal Era of the 1930s until Wounded Knee in 1973, many Indians in the East and Southeast navigated social pressures to assimilate to a black, colored, or white identity just to survive" (202).

Additionally, Starr's involvement in various genres made her somewhat of an elusive figure for music historians. The mainstream press and music magazines of the mid-1940s to late 1950s (the height of her career), as well as music historians of the last fifty years, vigorously debated Starr's vocal abilities, musical contributions, and genre crossing. That is, they struggled to categorize what *type* of a singer Starr was, as well as where she fell on the mid-twentieth-century spectrum of authenticity to commercialism.

Shifts in American popular music beginning in the 1920s that stemmed from the recording industry's emphasis on racial essentialism promoted "authentic" music categorized by race. Karl Hagstrom Miller has argued that this "musical color line" that emerged in American popular music came from the recording industry's shift to market recordings by race and genre.[14] While previously musicians had performed many styles or genres of music regardless of racial or regional background, beginning in the 1920s, the recording industry's new divisions marked some performances as more "authentic" than others. The recording industry policed musical talent by authorizing only those performances that accorded with the singer's "race." For example, the industry promoted the idea that African Americans should only record particular genres of music that were understood as culturally emerging from black communities, such as the blues.[15] In the 1920s, leading scholars in the music field saw music as "a form of expression, not only of individual feelings on collective culture but also of essential racial characteristics, capacities, and stages of evolution."[16] These notions limited the kinds of music an individual performer could record, and elevated some performances as more "authentic" and valuable than others.

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[14] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 2.
[15] McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 77.
[16] Miller, *Segregating Sound*, 3-4.

Though Starr "looked white" in many instances, her vocal maneuvering and appearance point to possibilities for boundary transgression in terms of both genre and race. Kay Starr deployed her voice, music, and presentation strategically to navigate the music industry's essentialist notions of genre and race. Throughout her career, Starr presented a Southern regional, working-class image, performing whiteness through her appearance, and sometimes through her voice. Because she sang with various white bands, including those of Glenn Miller, Charlie Barnet, and Joe Venuti, it is likely that she sought to adhere to audience expectations. For the press, Starr mobilized her upbringing in the South and the regional hillbilly identity that accompanied it while inserting a country twang into her vocal jazz repertoire. Her dress and music styles, which included styles consistent with images of middle-class domesticity and country music, aligned with dominant understandings of whiteness in different contexts. Her performance of whiteness also conformed to the expectations of the audience that women singers should *sound* like their race. Starr's use of her voice is important to understanding how "'white' voices have been culturally produced, employed and essentialized," and how these voices can operate in conjunction with image.[17] Starr's appearance, her performance context, and her song choice and interpretation determined whether the audience read her as sounding "white" or "black." Her ability to shift and maneuver through her vocal chords was often unexpected. In these ways, Starr complicated the black-white binary of jazz, a division that also paralleled the performance expectations of how big bands should sound according to race. As Sally Placksin argues, by the 1930s, "White bands were often not expected (and not taught or trained) to play as "hot" or "rough" as black bands, while black bands were expected only to swing and play the

[17] See McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing,* and Richard Dyer, *White: Essays on Race and Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997). Presentations of whiteness through the voice and have been many, but the scholarship remains sparse.

blues, and nothing very "sweet."[18] Race and music styles were supposed to align for both bands and their vocalists, according to the standards of the time.

Because white men produced much of the discourse surrounding "authenticity" in jazz, it is valuable to see how these debates have functioned to reveal specific anxieties about women performers, and particularly about women of color. White male jazz critics were largely the agents in debates over authenticity, as they were the cultural authorities whose ideas circulated in music magazines and newspapers and proved influential in the music scene and in public discourse.[19] Many critics discussed the bodies and appearances of women jazz singers in ways that over-emphasized their looks and minimized their vocal/music contributions. Indeed, gender played a major role in debates about musicians and musicianship. For example, a 1938 article from *Down Beat* titled "Why Women Musicians Are Inferior," argued that women were "emotionally unstable" and lacked the "time, ambition or patience" to perform jazz music well.[20] In addition, women of color were frequently constrained by longstanding racial and sexual stereotypes. For example, black women singers had to combat stereotypes such as the hypersexualized "jezebel," an image that was used to justify the forced labor and sexual exploitation of black women and which led to their devaluation.[21] This chapter analyzes how these white jazz critics debated the place of non-white/non-black jazz singers and what anxieties those debates revealed.

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[18] Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 87.
[19] It is important to note that there were some women jazz critics who wrote important quality work, such as Helen Oakley Dance in the 1930s, and later, Val Wilmer in the 1960s. See Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 86, 122-126.
[20] Unsigned article, "Why Women Musicians Are Inferior," *Down Beat*, February 1938, 4.
[21] Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1985), 61.

I first examine how critics in newspapers and magazines discussed Starr's authenticity through her music and her performances from late 1930s through the late 1950s.[22] When possible, I include Starr's words to see how she presented herself in the context of these debates about her musicianship and authenticity. In the second half of the chapter, I utilize performance theory in a close textual/musical analysis of Starr's songs and performances to offer a new narrative of her story and music. I consider how "seeing *and* hearing race in the performing body" can lead to new understandings of women of color performers and their musical contributions.[23] In doing so, I follow Deborah Wong's analysis of racialization through performance[24] to show how Kay Starr used both her body and her voice to market herself to multiple audiences. Paradoxically, Starr's agile maneuvering between different genres, styles, voices, and fashions minimized her public visibility after the peak of her career, and led to her erasure from subsequent jazz histories. Focusing on Kay Starr's place in jazz music helps to expose the boundaries of the genre which marginalized women singers involved in popular music production in the 1950s.

Singers have always occupied a contested space, especially within the bounds of jazz musicianship. Lara Pellegrinelli argues that a hierarchy exists in jazz music, with instrumentalists seen as the leaders and authenticators of jazz, and singers seen as marginal—lacking in technical skills and musical innovation.[25] From the emergence of big band vocalists around 1930, jazz singing has challenged boundaries and caused tensions within jazz music, operating as an

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[22] My goal is not to assess where Starr and her music "belong" or how "authentic" Starr was. Rather, I examine what kind of work these debates over authenticity do in drawing the boundaries of the jazz tradition.
[23] Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance," 65.
[24] Ibid., 57.
[25] Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 3.

"ideological battleground" for who and what can be included in the genre of jazz.[26] As vocalists had an increasingly prominent role in musical performances, moving from only singing a few choruses to being central features in the spotlight, their position within jazz became ever more disputed, as did their "authenticity" as musicians. For example, a 1939 article in *Down Beat* by Ted Toll proclaimed, "The Gal Yippers Have No Place in Our Jazz Bands," arguing that the majority of women singers are not meant to sing jazz.[27] Against this backdrop, Starr had to maneuver her music and performances strategically. In this chapter, I extend Deborah Wong's analysis of "Other colors in jazz" to think more complexly about the mixed race Native American-Irish body in the performance of jazz singing.[28] Starr's racialization—made possible through her voice, body, music, and performances—allowed her to claim a limited but strategic position within jazz music. Not only did Starr assert a Native identity while promoting her working-class roots, she also insisted on feminine performances of the body, shifting her vocal style depending on audience demands and performance purpose.

Stepping In: Vocal Versatility and Life "On the Road" in Starr's Early Career

The influences of the record industry during Starr's childhood presented audiences and future singers with genre boundaries, important lines to which performers were expected to adhere. The genre of hillbilly music that emerged in the 1920s during Starr's childhood was tied to music market developments, and it circulated throughout the country through records and radio. The categories of "race records" and "hillbilly music" arose in tandem, and from the mid-1920s to mid-1950s, the industry marketed popular music in these categories to appeal to groups

[26] Ibid., 14-15.
[27] Toll, Ted, "The Gal Yippers Have No Place in Our Jazz Bands," *Down Beat*, Oct. 15, 1939, 16.
[28] Wong, "The Asian American Body in Performance," 67.

according to race, ethnicity, region, and class.[29] Though many record companies went out of business during the Great Depression, the records that had been produced in genres like hillbilly music became important standards for hopeful musicians and were frequently played on the radio. Record production and marketing were also becoming standard for musicians. As circulated commodities, records, like radio, served both to generate profit for the music industry and to allow music to travel to different places. Starr's music, and by extension, its "authenticity," would be defined and measured in juxtaposition to these music market developments. The records Starr listened to on the radio as a child also would have conveyed genre to audiences according to the racialized categories of "race music" (read: "black music") and "hillbilly" music (read: "white music"). Young singers would emulate the sounds they heard on records and the radio, which had been dispersed by recording companies that marketed by particular categories. Those singers who did not fit neatly into categories had lower chances of being signed by record companies.[30] Marketing categories solidified as musical genres with accompanying stylistic and aesthetic expectations for musicians to follow.[31]

Kay Starr's background and upbringing introduced her to "country music" and "hillbilly music" and informed her path to becoming a jazz singer. She was born Katherine La Verne Starkes in Dougherty, Oklahoma, on July 21, 1922. Her father, Harry Starkes, was Iroquois and her mother, Anne Starkes, was Cherokee, Choctaw, and Irish.[32] During her childhood, her family spent much time on the road, moving to various places in the South before settling in Texas.

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[29] William G. Roy, "'Race Records' and 'Hillbilly Music': Institutional Origins of Racial Categories in the American Commercial Recording Industry." *Poetics* 32, no. 3 (2004): 265, 269. Because furniture stores sold records to increase the sales of phonographs in the 1920s, business owners sought to catalog music that appealed to their purchasing clientele (274).
[30] Ibid., 277-278.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Gary Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd: Players and Writers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 80.

When Starr was 13 years old, she began singing for a Dallas radio station, WRR, earning money for her performances of pop music and hillbilly tunes.[33] In the local Dallas scene, Starr's popularity began to grow after she won a contest at Melba Theatre for her rendition of "Now's the Time to Fall in Love." After continuous misspellings of her name and many mispronunciations, she changed her name from Katherine Starkes to Kay Starr.[34] Starr then moved to Memphis to perform as a country singer.

Kay Starr's mobile upbringing foreshadowed how she would later utilize her class identity to craft her image as a modest performer with working-class roots. Her socioeconomic location as well as her parents' occupations normalized "life on the road." As she said in an interview with Gary Giddins, "My daddy worked for a big sprinkler company and was foreman when they put automatic sprinklers in big buildings all over Texas. I've said that I lived in every town in Texas for 15 minutes, because it seemed like that to me. I never really got to know anybody, and my mother was my playmate all my life—she's still the best girlfriend I've got—so it was easy for her to go on the road with me as my sister because we did everything together."[35] Starr's family traveled often to make a living. Starr's monetary contributions from her amateur singing career were likely needed income during the Great Depression. These experiences informed Starr's childhood and influenced Starr's self-representation and career in jazz music.

Starr's entry to the big band music business as a female vocalist aligned with changes in band gender dynamics, with bands increasingly including a "girl singer" to front all-male groups starting in the 1930s. Joe Venuti, prominent jazz musician and jazz violinist, is credited with

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[33] Publicity Department, RCA Victor Records, "Biography of Kay Starr," December 1955, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[34] "Kay Starr." Kay Starr Biography. Accessed February 26, 2016.
[35] Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd*, 80-81.

discovering Starr's talent in the Peabody Hotel in Memphis in 1937. Venuti's contract with the hotel required that he have a girl singer perform with his band;[36] without the vocals of a girl singer, his band would be deemed "incomplete."[37] As Kay Starr recounted in an interview, "[Joe Venuti] thought he could bluff his way through with a boy singer, but towns like Memphis, Tennessee, going through growing pains, weren't having it: The contract called for a girl singer, and where *is* she? They wouldn't let him open."[38] Starr refers to the necessity of girl singers specifically for towns like Memphis that had been severely affected by the Great Depression. Because these towns suffered economically, the strength presented by all-male bands served to thwart depression-era concerns of masculine powerlessness.[39] After 1929, many big bands began to replace male vocalists who had sung with popular bands in the 1920s and invested in appealing young women to sing for their groups in hopes of drawing a large male audience.[40] Music was one type of escape from the unemployment and hardships that plagued many Southern families. Big bands, too, faced such challenging conditions on their tours across the country and had to respond to the demands of audiences. Having a "girl singer" was one way in which gender roles were asserted and reinforced, and it allowed for an entertaining complement to the music of the big band. The body and voice of the woman performer on stage was readily consumed by (often male) audiences who were facing economic and emotional adversity, especially in the South. For Venuti, hiring Starr would allow him to continue to garner profits as his band toured throughout the U.S. The girl singer requirement had been established by the late 1930s, when places like Memphis begin the climb out of economic hardship.

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[36] David Dary, *Stories of Old-Time Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 239.
[37] Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*, 443.
[38] Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd*, 81.
[39] Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 83.
[40] Placksin, *American Women in Jazz*, 112.

Starr changed bands frequently throughout the 1930s and 1940s, which was not uncommon for women performers. Bandleaders regularly sought new talent, and women singers' voices often became exhausted and injured from the labor of road tours. Starr sang for groups led by Bob Crosby and Glenn Miller during the 1930s, and worked again with Joe Venuti and then Charlie Barnet in the 1940s.[41] In addition, Starr recorded her first songs, "Baby Me" and "Love with a Capital YOU" with Glenn Miller in 1939, before graduating from high school.[42] Starr recounted how she had to record those two songs in Marion Hutton's higher key, since the vocalist had recently collapsed on stage.[43] Because she had to record songs in a higher key than was comfortable for her voice, Starr compared herself to the high-pitched voice of the character Alfalfa from the movie *Little Rascals.*[44] As other scholars have pointed out, singers had little to no control over of most of the circumstances that shaped how they sounded.[45] Just as Starr had to sing outside her vocal range when she stood in for Marion Hutton, it was not uncommon for women jazz singers to force their voices to accommodate the needs of the band or to learn a brand new song on the spot in a recording studio.[46] Being flexible enough to sing in another singer's desired key speaks to Starr's versatility and ability to adapt to new situations; however, these early recordings also became the measure by which her talent and voice were assessed and judged by critics.

Women singers performed a vital function for big bands, as they added to the commercial appeal of big bands while also serving to connect the big band to the audience. Because singers

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[41] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 133.
[42] Barbara Hodgkins, "Starr Bright," *Metronome 65*, no. 8 Aug. 1949, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[43] Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd*, 82.
[44] Ibid.
[45] McClellan, *The Later Swing Era, 1942-1955*, 14.
[46] Ibid.

communicated messages through speech and through the voice, and because they provided the audience with a feminine and entertaining spectacle on the stage, they fostered an interaction that instrumentalists alone could not. Pellegrinelli argues that the voice is ascribed as an "embodied universal" that has the power of storytelling, making it appear more accessible to audiences than instruments might be.[47] In addition to acting as a storyteller, the big band "girl singer" functioned as the "visual and emotional link" to the audience.[48] Women singers of big bands appeared in glamorous dresses and articulated private emotions through their music and lyric interpretation.[49] Further, the male tenor popular singers who had previously sung with dance bands were being replaced with female altos.[50] Cultural authorities thought of male "crooners"—young male performers who sang popular love songs with a female audience's desire in mind—as effeminate and homosexual, and thus as poor models of American manhood.[51] A female presence on stage thus became necessary to police the boundaries of gender: a trend that emerged after the Great Depression to assert masculinity through cultural norms.[52]

The female voice and body in performance were especially important in the South where the female vocalist emerged as the standard in jazz hubs and where jazz music drew upon a strong tradition of blues women singers. During the Great Migration (1916-1970), many musicians moved to cities such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles in search of work. As James M. Gregory puts it, "The northern city entertainment zones were the principal hubs of an occupational migration system that both drew musicians out of the South and moved them back

[47] Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 58.
[48] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 122.
[49] Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 85.
[50] McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 29.
[51] Ibid., 2-3.
[52] Ibid., 6.

through it again."[53] The economic draw of these "entertainment zones," in addition to the presence of record companies, managers, and famous clubs in these locations, continued to attract musicians from the South. However, the South served not only as the birthplace of jazz, but also as the region in which the blues women performed and asserted a cultural force. By the 1930s, women singers' presence in jazz and on stage had been firmly established. For big bands of the 1930s, having the presence of a woman singer not only provided a visual complement to a band's performance, but also drew a male audience, asserted newly re-defined gender boundaries, and continued female presence on stage in the South, though through the female big band singer as opposed to blues women singers.

Like many other women jazz singers, Starr filled the shoes of a prominent singer, reflecting the fungibility of the woman jazz singer in the 1940s and 1950s. Audiences, and therefore big band leaders and marketers, created a high demand for "girl singers" of all races, and there became a large supply of them. Women singers constantly replaced one another during big band road tours. In Starr's case, in addition to standing in for Marion Hutton with Miller's group, she also took over the place of Lena Horne in Charlie Barnet's band from 1943 to 1945.[54] Starr stepped in when needed to promote her career and to take advantage of opportunities that presented themselves.

While singers played a central role for big bands, they were also undervalued and often exploited by their employers and bandleaders. McClellan argues that many singers held a very low status in big bands and orchestras, often even lower than the bands' sidemen: professional

[53] James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 139.
[54] McClellan, *The Later Swing Era, 1942-1955*, 106.

musicians hired as temps to fill a spot for a particular recording or performance.[55] Singers who were beginning their careers, and even those who had made a name for themselves, had little job security, and were often forced to push their bodies and voices to the point of exhaustion in performances and on the road. For example, Starr injured her vocal chords after two years of performing with Barnet's band, and she was forced to take a break from singing.[56] The pace at which the bandleaders replaced their singers also required women to accommodate the bands with whom they sang. Starr learned to navigate these challenging circumstances through her performances and through her self-presentation.

Developments within the music industry played a significant role in the types of music circulating through records and radio during Starr's childhood. This industry informed how singers like Starr heard and then performed genre, race, and region through music. Singers who were "picked up" by big bands performed an important function in connecting bands to their audiences during the rough times of the Great Depression. The female voice and body in particular were the key to the success of the big band, though the singer's position within the band was often viewed as marginal. Standing in the spotlight, singers occupied a highly desirable position in some ways, but they were also highly exploitable. In order to navigate the politics of big band performance, Kay Starr mobilized her image presentation, versatile vocal chords, and discourses of "authenticity" to position herself for success.

Authenticity, Jazz Shifts, and Hillbilly "Roots"

In the earlier stages of Starr's career, the press often spoke of her as an "authentic" jazz and blues singer, in sharp contrast to descriptions of her contemporaries as purely "commercial."

[55] Ibid., xiii-xiv.
[56] Hodgkins, "Starr Bright."

Jazz historians, even those who write about women musicians, have described singers of big bands as "easily forgettable, synthetic products."[57] In October 1938, *Swing* magazine said, "Yes, girl vocalists are a nuisance. Too many of them are beautiful, and can't sing."[58] Many critics juxtaposed Starr against the image of the "commercial canary." One review emphatically stated, "Jazz singer Kay Starr abhors music in the commercial category. She's as non-commercial as the blues she loves and sings."[59] This "non-commercial" narrative—both of the woman performer and of blues music itself—was a central component of authenticity debates in jazz during the post-WWII time period. The article asserts, "[Starr] would rather sing the songs she likes in an obscure night club, than force herself into the commercial mold of canarying which lush contracts and national acclaim too often bring."[60] The *Band Leader and Record Review* authorizes Starr's choice of performance space ("obscure night club") as a marker of authenticity, along with Starr's apparent desire to sing the blues without "selling out." The press claims Starr's resistance to commodification even despite her increasing fame. This desirable assessment of authenticity could aid a singer's career in the shifting priorities of the music industry.

The preferred audience of the singer, as well as performance space, were important in determining whether an audience perceived a woman musician as authentic. The degree to which she engaged in popular music traditions of the late 1940s and early 1950s also played a role. The lucrative post-war era ushered in the commodification of women singers, who signed on to large record companies and produced popular jazz records for monetary gain. Early in her career, Starr promoted the idea that she did not engage in these lucrative commercial endeavors, and many

[57] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 124.
[58] *Swing* magazine, October 1938, cited in Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 124.
[59] "Kay Isn't Commercial."
[60] Ibid.

media critics endorsed her self-representation. She criticized "singing with tricks, forced expression and phoney feeling," implicitly contrasting her own "natural" performances with those of the "commercial canaries" on the larger music scene.[61] According to her supporters, Starr was not in it for the money. Being "commercial" was articulated as possessing an inherent quality, much in the way that "authenticity" was seen as "natural." Starr's early anti-commercial stance supported the idea of the genuine nature of her vocal artistry, and actively worked against the idea that she sang primarily for commercial gain. However, Starr also had to find ways to generate income to support herself and maintain her career success.

For singers of the 1940s, shifts in genre and image were required to maintain prominence in the music industry, as well as to reap the economic benefits of music performance. Jazz scholar Joel E. Siegel argues that the first generation of jazz singers came to an end by the early 1940s.[62] Siegel points out that singers like Kay Starr and Dinah Washington "returned to blues and gospel roots, bringing jazz singing back to basics."[63] With the close of World War II, the U.S. entered a prosperous age in which competition increased for singers. The numbers of singers pursuing solo careers greatly increased, while other big band singers went on to become movie stars. Throughout World War II, vocalists had asserted their presence in the music industry and big bands started to decline due to the large expense that accompanied them.[64] Big bands were very costly because of the number of salaries to be paid, the instruments and equipment required, and the travel expenses to be covered. As it became tougher to finance big bands, many singers began to work in smaller combo groups or alone. Small combos and soloists

[61] Ibid.
[62] Joel E. Siegel, "Jazz Singing: Between Blues and Bebop," in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, ed. Bill Kirchner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 234.
[63] Ibid.
[64] McClellan, *The Later Swing Era, 1942-1955*, xiii-xiv.

could promote a more intimate experience with audiences that also supported bands' needs to conduct inexpensive forms of performance so they could continue to make a living playing jazz music. Because of the increased competition in the music industry, there was also increased pressure to be marketable—to brand oneself as having a unique singing style.

Kay Starr, along with many other vocalists, had to diversify her style in the 1940s. For Starr, this meant returning to her "roots" as a hillbilly singer, which presented some conflicts with her previous identification as a jazz singer. This move back towards hillbilly music was also strategically aligned with the rising popularity of country music, fueled by the Hollywood movie industry's use of Western-cowboy-outfitted musical artists and actors.[65] By the 1940s, the hillbilly genre had come to be associated with white, working-class Southerners, and the term "hillbilly" had emerged as a derisive reference to uneducated rural individuals.[66] Nonetheless, Starr actively embraced this term when thinking about her musical influences. Shifts in Starr's singing style brought questions of genre authenticity into the picture and challenged ideas about what it meant to be a vocalist performing jazz music.

Starr's comments about her own participation in music evinced hierarchical notions of musicianship, and by extension, ideas about gender, race, and musical authenticity. Starr subtly participated in these debates over musicianship in jazz, articulating relationships between instrumentalists and vocalists while also attempting to legitimize her presence as an authentic musician. In a 1949 interview with Barbara Hodgkins, Starr says, "The nicest compliment I ever

[65] For more about the rise of country music, see Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
[66] Ibid., 196-198. The term "hillbilly" was often controversial in the music industry. As Peterson points out, "In the late 1940s with the greatly increasing interest in country music, the term "hillbilly" was used or avoided in the press *because of* its negative connotations" (197).

had paid to me was when I was told that I sing like a fellow playing an instrument."[67] In this statement, Starr played to the perceptions in the music industry of the '40s that the most respected position in the band was that of male instrumentalist. Historically, some singers have asserted an identity of "musician first, singer second," while others claim the voice as their instrument[68] in order to combat the perception that singers are lacking in skills and musicianship. To embody the sound of an instrument set the bar for many blues and jazz vocalists. In the early jazz scene, blues women sang songs similar to those played by instrumentalists, and performed them to emulate instrumental sounds in many instances.[69] Vocal techniques such as growls and slurs produced sounds similar to those of trumpets and trombones.[70] Gendered valuation of male instrumentalists impacted women's vocal styles as well as how they advocated for their own vocal skills and techniques, as shown in Starr's comments.

Jazz music's focus on improvisation has also been an important element in defining "authentic and "inauthentic" musicians. Improvisation was one way in which jazz musicians could present their technical abilities and understanding of jazz notes, scales, and harmonies by being able to perform aptly on the spot. For singers, scatting—or vocal improvisation with syllables and words/nonwords—was how they could produce instrumental-like sounds. This often became the standard for "jazz singing," and reinforced the hierarchy of instrumentalists above singers in jazz music. Other jazz scholars, however, have pointed to the dialectical relationship between musicians and instrumentalists.[71] As Linda Dahl has articulated, "To say

[67] Hodgkins, "Starr Bright."
[68] Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 8.
[69] Ibid., 12.
[70] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 98.
[71] See Dahl, *Stormy Weather*.

that a singer wails like a horn or that a player sings on the horn is a mark of high praise in jazz."[72] Thus defining musicianship in jazz singing was debated both in the jazz scene and in jazz historiography. In her oral histories with jazz musicians, Pellegrinelli has pointed out that many people have a tendency to compare excellent singers to instrumentalists.[73] For example, as Stuart Nicholson said of Ella Fitzgerald: "[s]he could swing with an abandon that very few instrumentalists, let alone singers, in jazz could match."[74] The ability to sound like an instrumentalist (and understand music like one) is seen as a measure of authenticity as well as talent for singers, and it is clear that that singers have difficulty attaining this authenticity in jazz, according to Nicholson's statement. Here, authenticity is also constituted through an association with a masculinized form that has prowess represented by instrumental virtuosity. When Starr aimed to sound like "a fellow playing an instrument," she acknowledged the hierarchies and tensions present in jazz musicianship, but also asserted her ability to compete.

Starr also positioned herself as an authentic musician by expressing her ability to *feel* the music. In the same interview with Barbara Hodgkins, Starr said, "I've run the gamut from hillbilly to jazz to just plain modern music to ballads, and though I might not sing them all well, I feel them."[75] Here, Starr built on the popular notion that singers "sing what they feel," a fallacy that, as Pellegrinelli has argued, simultaneously upholds ideas of the voice's ability for "natural" communication while also acting as an expression of agency.[76] When a singer says she sings

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[72] Ibid., 98.
[73] See Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 4.
[74] Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: A Biography of the First Lady of* Jazz (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1995), 191, quoted in Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 5.
[75] Hodgkins, "Starr Bright."
[76] Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 58.

what she feels, she claims that she can access a particular song text and give it voice.[77] This notion of authenticity contrasts with the idea that mastering masculine techniques leads to authentic music performance because Starr emphasizes naturalized feeling in this case. Singing then acts as a unique "gift" that can be deemed authentic, as it stems from the body. Starr mobilized various elements of musicianship to express her authenticity, presenting herself as authentic in both the technical and natural senses.

Starr also demonstrated that as a musician she valued hillbilly as a challenging style that required labor to master and contributed to its usage as a versatile tool. In the interview with Barbara Hodgkins, Starr also commented on the technicalities of vocal performance found in hillbilly that connect to "authentic" jazz singing: "And if I can sing [these styles] well, I attribute that to the fact that I have sung hillbilly stuff…it's a hard style to sing, and it made my voice flexible enough so that I'm able to have my own style."[78] Not only did Starr point to the rigor of hillbilly music performance, she also used it to claim her own unique identity as a performer in an increasingly competitive environment. Contesting the idea that "hillbilly" music was for "unschooled," white, working-class rural folk, Starr marketed her unique style as distinct from the "commercial canaries." Not only did Starr claim her connection to hillbilly music, but the press regularly picked up on this connection as well.

The media depicted Starr's modesty through an emphasis on her hillbilly roots and working-class upbringing. Some critics asserted Starr's authenticity as a blues/jazz singer through descriptions of her modest personality and physical presentation, especially in relation to her "roots" in hillbilly music. In an October 1953 article by Harry Cronin titled "Their Lucky Starr," he describes Starr as: "The dark-haired, smiling and level-eyed contralto has the

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.

reputation of being a very regular sort who doesn't seem to know she's a headliner. She credits her success to hillbilly singing experience that began in childhood."[79] Starr's "feminine" modesty—not *knowing* her popularity as a performer—is projected as allowing Starr to transcend class boundaries. In a music industry that frequently placed singers "on display" to serve as eye candy for an audience, the press also depicted Starr's personality as appropriately humble and relatable. To some degree, Starr is presented as a modest figure who pushes against performances of excessively lavish appearances and commercialism that continued to gather strength in the post-war era. For Starr, this "modesty" as presented by the media really refers to her class origins, which assisted in perceptions of Starr as an "authentic" jazz singer.

Starr's emphasis on the importance of both jazz and hillbilly music for her musical career worked against the widespread cultural opposition of the two genres—a conflict that represented the formation of class distinction through musical tastes. "All my tricks," claimed Starr, "come from that hillbilly singing on and on, yodeling and jumping octaves."[80] Her emphasis on the skills required to perform hillbilly music, viewed as lower-class popular music, shows how the style of music has the potential to make a performer skilled in a number of other genres. This contributed to Starr's versatility as a performer. In referring to her "tricks," she connects to a broader audience to promote a modest and relatable image of herself as a performer. Starr also asserts that skills from hillbilly singing can be translated across genres, and that her vocal hillbilly skills in particular give her a certain agility in jazz: "Contrary to what people say, it's a hard style to sing, and it made my voice flexible enough so that I'm able to

[79] Harry Cronin, "Their Lucky Starr," *Sunday News*, Oct. 11, 1953, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[80] Ibid.

have my own style."[81] By bringing hillbilly singing, a type of music associated with working-class whites, into jazz, Starr expanded jazz as a genre when it was shifting towards the more exclusive styles of free jazz and hard bop.

Making Sense of Starr: Mildred Bailey, Whiteness, and "Authentic" Blues Lineages

Perceptions of Starr as a "natural" singer were intertwined with narratives about Starr's race: a point of fixation for newspapers and presses. The debates over Starr's race and her ability to sing jazz and blues "authentically" were not disconnected from a history of racialized music-making. As many scholars have pointed out, "whiteness" emerged through racialized discourses that pitted African Americans' "natural" musical abilities against white musicians' hard work and mastery. In that sense, blues and jazz as musical genres functioned as "racialist discourses."[82] Though blues and jazz had their roots in African American history of slavery, those outside the black-white binary (discussed earlier) who participated in these styles of music challenged and complicated these racialist discourses. Starr was an active agent in how she presented herself to the public. To the press, Starr often identified herself by saying, "I'm three-quarters American Indian, one-quarter Irish."[83] Newspapers almost always mentioned that Starr was part Native American, but typically did not say much about her racial background beyond stating that she was "part Indian." However, many critics drew loose parallels between Starr's racial background and her engagement with blues music.

Critics sometimes asserted her connection to the blues/jazz tradition, but were nonetheless ambivalent about her ability to fully embody jazz, both because she looked and

[81] Ibid.
[82] Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene," 7.
[83] Jack Hawn, "Lounging Around With Singer Kay Starr," *Los Angeles Times*, Jul. 24, 1988.

dressed white and because of her Native American identity. In a 1947 *Down Beat* article, a critic drew attention to Starr's authenticity as a singer by commenting on her "full, meaty-voiced quality."[84] Because jazz is a style of music rooted in and deeply connected to the blues, having a "full, meaty-voiced quality" is seen as an asset for Starr, and one that is made possible through her racialization. A 1946 article from *Hollywood Note* states, "Kay is part Indian. Her voice is as big as the proverbial barn and reminiscent of the late Bessie Smith's in power and depth."[85] In linking her music with her Native American heritage, the press presented Starr as having a connection to the blues tradition. Scholars have shown how blues elements, such as call-and-response song structure and rhythmic patterns, also have roots in Native American music.[86] Further, during the slave trade, African American and Native American people lived together on plantations, and after, slaves who escaped "found refuge in Native communities from the South and, in time, up the Underground Railroad to the Six Nations in Canada."[87] The fact that Kay's Native American background directly precedes the comparison to Bessie Smith suggests that her race denoted authenticity in the jazz tradition.

Nonetheless, Starr's Native American identity was not always seen as compatible with the blues tradition, which largely remained an African American domain of music until it was appropriated and reconfigured by white artists in the 1960s. For example, in an effort to place

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[84] "Kay Starr Shows Best Talent Since La Bailey," *Down Beat*, Oct. 8, 1947, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[85] "A Starr the hard way!", *Hollywood Note*, Mar. 1946, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[86] Fogden, Katherine, "Exploring Native American Influence on the Blues," *American Indian News Service*, Sep. 17, 2009, Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian. See also, Pura Fe´. "Pura Fe´ Talks about the Indian Blues (Native American Blues Music)." *YouTube*, YouTube, Mar. 2, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=108O6f8XWxU. See also, Catherine Bainbridge, dir. *Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World*. Les Films Revolution Pictures, 2017 and Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee, eds., *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 2016).
[87] Ibid.

Starr in debates of the commercial versus the authentic in late 1940s jazz music, the *Down Beat* critic also suggests that Starr does not master blues and ballads.[88] He says that in these types of songs, "the little lady over-mugs and over-gesticulates. The message of blues and busted-romance ballads is in the lyrics and melody line and any smiling, winking or tempo-keeping motions only detract from presentation."[89] The critic suggests that if she could better connect with the "story of the lyrics," and the history of the song, she would be better able to perform and interpret it. He points to Starr's inability to fully connect with a blues tradition and to understand blues' lyrics, perhaps due to her being Native American—not African American. The kinds of bodily performance that the critic points out, including "smiling," "winking," and "tempo-keeping motions" are not in keeping with the stereotype of the African American blues, which is to appear in despair and with natural rhythm and feeling.[90] The critic sees Starr as also unable to transmit the messages of romance ballads, sung in crooning style and dominated by white singers by the 1920s.[91] In addition, the critic's assessment of Starr's performances upholds an essentialized standard for these specific genres of music with the assumption that blues music and romance ballads should adhere to racialized expectations of the two genres. Ultimately, this

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[88] In the 1930s and 1940s, there were increasing tensions between "commerce and art" in the jazz world, and different communities of jazz musicians had debates over the status of jazz (as folk art, as popular art, or as high art). Women jazz singers were also caught up in this debate, as many needed to generate income but also took great pride in their music. As the post-war economic boom struck America, debates of "commercial" vs. "authentic" heightened further. See John McDonough, "Streamlining Jazz: Major Soloists of the 1930s and 1940s," in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz*, ed. Bill Kirchner, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). 206-219.

[89] "Kay Starr Shows Best Talent Since La Bailey."

[90] It is important to point out that the blues women of the early 1900s incorporated many different kinds of performative gestures in tent shows, including the ones mentioned above. See McGinley, *Staging the Blues*.

[91] It should be noted that crooning and ballads had a long history of being performed by people of many different races, ethnicities, and classes. In fact, some of the first crooners were black women who often inserted satire into their performances. See McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing*, 41-52.

Down Beat author praises Starr's singing abilities, but points out the flaws he sees in her performance abilities, which served to disconnect her from the blues.[92] Starr's racialized body was scrutinized for its actions, including performance gestures and animation, which were perceived as making her appear inauthentic.

Yet the press also highlighted Starr's whiteness by comparing her with other "white" jazz singers, distancing her from an African American blues tradition. Many articles compared Starr to Mildred Bailey, "The Rockin' Chair Lady"—a very influential jazz and popular singer of the early twentieth century. Throughout her career, audiences perceived Bailey to be a white jazz singer, but like Starr, she was part Native American as her mother was a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. As Chad Hamill points out, "Mildred Bailey was 'white' because she was cast that way within a jazz narrative that had left no room for Indian jazz musicians. The 'white jazz-singer' misnomer mattered for many reasons, not the least of which was the fact that Bailey exerted considerable influence within the jazz and pop worlds, pioneering the vocal 'swing' style that countless singers sought to emulate, including Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, and Tony Bennett."[93] Here, Hamill points out the significance of the representation of Bailey as white: her powerful influence on jazz and popular music became ingrained in American history. Only recently have scholars pointed out Bailey's Native American background.[94] Still, the press made links between the two presumably white jazz singers. For Starr, it was likely that performing whiteness in her image and through her costuming—presenting herself in glamorous ball gowns that reflected upper middle-class values of the 1940s and 1950s, for instance—

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[92] See, for example, McGinley, *Staging the Blues*.
[93] Chad Hamill, "American Indian Jazz: Mildred Bailey and the Origins of America's Most Musical Art Form" in Jeff Berglund, Jan Johnson, and Kimberli Lee, eds., *Indigenous Pop: Native American Music from Jazz to Hip Hop* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2016), 33.
[94] Robinson, Jessica, "Search For Jazz Singer's Roots Brings Together Two Julias," *NPR*, 2 May 2012.

helped her secure career opportunities. Scholars like McClellan have pointed out that the radio networks were also becoming more discriminatory: "Before the change, networks had featured top swing musicians regardless of race and, in some cases, mixed bands that played modern jazz. By 1947, radio networks such as CBS only featured vocalists like Dinah Shore and Frank Sinatra or singing bandleaders such as Vaughn Monroe."[95] Thus Starr likely promoted an image of whiteness and glamour to provide herself with opportunities.

Starr also staked a claim to jazz music by alluding to connections between established Native American jazz musicians and their ability to sing jazz. In 1985, when Starr was asked later in her life if she believed there was an ethnic connection between her and Bailey, she responded:

> I don't have any idea, but it's interesting, isn't it? Red Norvo and Mildred used to come to my house at the beach, but we never talked about it… But most of us believe in elements, in wind and trees and earth, and I think we're just children of the soil. I think we three Indians, if you've researched the other two, you've found they've always been honest: They weren't trying to prove anything in particular, they were just doing what came naturally, and rolled with the punches. That's the personality Mildred had, it was mine, and the little bit I knew of Lee Wiley, it was hers. Of course, Indian music has a hell of a beat—it's all drums and chanting. There is not a whole lot of melody to our music.[96]

Starr asserts her belonging to a tradition of jazz music, while also hinting at the improvisation required to succeed and affirming the importance of natural "talent." She alludes to similarities in Native American jazz singers that have enabled them to perform jazz music skillfully. Not

[95] McClellan, *The Later Swing Era, 1942-1955*, 13.
[96] Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd*, 80.

only does Starr point to a history of Native American singers in jazz, but also positions herself as unique among popular contemporaries who were typically understood as either black or white. She makes space for herself and others in the larger history of jazz music.

In the press, Starr was often depicted with ambiguity, and her authenticity as a singer was often directly linked to her racialization and to her identity as part-Native American. The discourses that circulated expressed contradictory ideas about Starr's place in jazz, sometimes citing her "natural" ability to sing the blues, and at other times criticizing her performance techniques and questioning aspects of her identity, like race, that appeared to be distant from an "authentic" blues and jazz tradition. Starr herself sometimes mobilized a different discourse of authenticity when she referenced the masculinized instrumentalization of voice. There were also moments when the press sought to place Starr in a lineage of other "white" jazz singers, which raised questions about Starr's "authenticity." However, Starr maneuvered these discourses of race and authenticity through flexible and fluid self-presentation, showing a careful awareness of how to perform her image and vocal abilities.

Complex Embodiments: Kay Starr's Performances

In a 1952 variety show segment of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, Kay Starr appears on stage dressed in a long, strapless ballroom gown. A band strikes a collective bluesy chord. Starr smiles widely and gestures gracefully toward the audience while belting the lyrics "I woke up this morning/Hated to get out of bed/But I called up the weatherman/And this is what he said."[97] Starr simultaneously embodies expectations of delicate femininity and projects a loud sound with a brassy timbre. Her face is very animated, and she glances toward, then winks at the audience.

[97] Kay Starr, "It's a Good Day," *The Colgate Comedy Hour,* 1952.

She gestures upwards with both of her arms and then inserts a blues slide on the notes when she sings, "It's gonna be a good day/A fine day."[98] Starr emphasizes her sound on the words "good" and "fine." This opening to "It's a Good Day," an addition to Peggy Lee's original version, inserts Starr within a blues tradition that does not readily come through in pop songs such as this one.[99]

At this point, the piano slows its tempo and lingers on the notes before the big band sounds another collective hit that swings the song up-tempo. Starr then breaks into "It's a Good Day," snapping her fingers along with the music as she sways her body back and forth while making gestures to involve the audience. After singing a few choruses and verses, Starr slows the tempo and adds an extra bluesy edge to her voice, swinging the notes as she goes. She also sharply cues the band with her hand gestures—likely a necessary element for Starr to alter the form and tempo of "It's a Good Day."

I describe this performance in depth because it illustrates the unique nature of Starr's theatricality of gesture (as some critics would argue, too much theatricality), her vocal versatility, and the ways in which she could embody multiple genres and styles of singing simultaneously to transgress genre boundaries. It also reveals her ability to engage with the blues through the notes she sang as well as the timbre of her voice. Starr uses subtle elements in her performances in attempts to connect to a blues tradition through her body, making the body/voice of a mixed race, Native American-Irish singer visible in blues and jazz traditions of the twentieth century while also incorporating elements from Native American musical practices. For example, Starr's performance draws attention to the power behind what has been called "in between the notes," a

[98] Ibid.
[99] "It's a Good Day" was originally written by Peggy Lee and Dave Barbour and published in 1946.

space that has an ability to express emotion and connect to the audience. As Chad Hamill points out of Mildred Bailey's singing style, "In this traditional style, what happens 'in between the notes' gives a song its strong emotive quality, a type of movement used frequently and to similar effect in jazz."[100] Starr's use of the space "in between the notes" functions similarly, as she uses this space to trigger emotions in the listener. Just as in the opening to "It's a Good Day" when Starr lingers on words such as "good" and "day," with a forceful and yet questioning tone before cutting off the sound, she gestures to the audience where the song will go next. The listener can *feel* the intensity of the notes and then the space, and Starr's performance transmits an affective potential to the audience. Starr utilized such techniques in her performances to connect with audiences, who could then draw various meanings from her performances.

Other performances by Kay Starr conveyed meanings that were more focused on the commercial nature of music production, conforming to music industry standards. For example, in an early Scopitone Video Jukebox Recording of "Wheel of Fortune" in Technicolor, the film opens with the sound of a spinning roulette wheel in a casino staging. Several women in various colored leotards sway back and forth to the music while other shake their hips rapidly. Starr walks out on stage in a bright red dress to sing "The wheel of fortune/Goes spinning around."[101] Starr appears in casual contrast to the dancers who are clearly on display and who swivel their hips in a circular motion. She walks casually around the mock casino scene as she sings. Her voice draws out the words toward the end of each line, emphasizing the slow mood of longing present in the song's message. The film often shows Starr singing in front of spinning roulette wheels to emphasize the message of the song.

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[100] Hamill, "American Indian Jazz: Mildred Bailey and the Origins of America's Most Musical Art Form," 35.
[101] Kay Starr, "Wheel of Fortune," Scopitone Video Jukebox.

The "Wheel of Fortune" film fits into a history of largely unsuccessful Scopitone films in the 1960s that commodified women's bodies in pursuit of profit while also trying to showcase popular songs and singers. As one scholar put it, from watching a few Scopitones, the viewer can see that "their primary objective is to display as much scantily clad female flesh as possible."[102] In "Wheel of Fortune" film, however, Starr appears in more conservative dress than the leotard-clad women. In addition, the dancers appear to "exist completely outside the temporality of the song," as they gyrate their hips quickly while Starr glides along to the slow tempo of the song.[103] While Scopitones in general seem to attempt to meld together a number of different interests—dancers attempting to present sex appeal, and Kay Starr, a middle-aged popular singer performing her hit song—scholars have argued that the production of Scopitones with these different aims lend itself to lack of cohesion and awkward contrasts.[104] However, as films like this one were circulated, so were ideas about Starr's performances. Moving into the late 1960s, the visual and musical contradictions that inhabited this production pointed to new shifts in how music would be presented through the female body and female voice. Debates about Starr's authenticity could not be separated from the meanings that circulated about her various performances through such mediums as television and Scopitone films.

From "Authentic" to "Commercial": Starr's Shift from Jazz

Years of singing with big bands caused Starr severe vocal injuries, and she worked hard to maintain a picture of vocal "authenticity" while she justified her shifts in singing styles. When Starr was told that her voice could not handle singing with a big band any longer, she set out to

[102] Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 64.
[103] Ibid., 65.
[104] Ibid.

work on her own. It was a convenient time for Starr to move into smaller group performances and solo records, as the music industry was also beginning to shift. In a 1950 article in *Down Beat*, Starr said, "It hurts me when people say my voice has changed. Why, one man called me up and said he'd heard I'd had an operation on my throat. He wondered how I was getting along! I told him I was just fine, and I'd never had an operation like that in my life!"[105] Starr's comments convey that she vigorously opposed the idea that her voice would be altered by surgery and sought to eliminate the rumor. Altered vocal chords could lead to Starr's music being deemed as less "authentic" and instead, "phoney," as the vocal chords used to produce the sounds would have been modified by surgery. Because her image depended on being viewed as an authentic, non-commercial performer with a "natural" voice, Starr claimed instead that her style of singing had developed.

As Starr's career continued, she moved increasingly away from jazz. As she explained in 1950, "You can't make money as a jazz singer, and with a little daughter to support and bring up I've had to get commercial. Am I happy? Now, what do you think?"[106] At this later point in her life, Starr prioritized making money to support her daughter, and she drew attention to this issue. She said, "I was brought up to be a jazz singer, but I could never make any money doing that. Do you think I like to sing a song like *Hoop-De-Doo?* Or imagine anyone going up and saying 'I loved you while the fiddles played'—fiddles!"[107] Starr critiqued the content of some of the songs that she sang, but pointed to the fact that money was an important factor in her life. Precisely

[105] "Can't Make Money As A Jazz Singer: Starr," *Down Beat*, December 1950, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[106] Kay Starr, "My Best On Wax," *Down Beat*, Dec. 15, 1950. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[107] Ibid.

because Starr expressed a frustration with this kind of popular music yet sang it anyway, these songs deserve a closer examination.

In the early 1950s, some claimed that Starr's music could be both "musically attractive" and "commercially attractive."[108] For example, James, B. Conkling, then Vice President of Capitol Records wrote, "Some [records of songs] are musically attractive and others are commercially attractive…I venture to state that 'Mississippi' achieves the rare distinction of falling into both categories. The song itself is sufficiently 'commercial' to appeal to the public; Kay Starr's rendering of it, plus the intelligent and 'progressive' accompaniment from Frank DeVol makes this a side not to be missed."[109] He also said, "On the other hand, 'A Game Of Broken Hearts' is commercial—period. This soulful song is given barber-shop treatment by Kay, and what appears to be a coloured quartet. The vocal partnership begins to pay off during the up-tempo passage, but the whole side contains more debits than credits."[110] Even the metaphors Conkling used refer to the force of the commercial in these debates, and the review presents a very negative view of those songs that were seen as "commercial—period." His reference to the "debits" of the song conveys that when a song is perceived to be solely commercial, it will it not be financially lucrative. This perception of commercial music could drastically damage one's image, as was the case for Kay Starr.

Other critics began to see Starr as shifting to a purely commercial style, in sharp contrast to their representations of her earlier career. An article titled "Laurie Henshaw's 'Popular' Reviews" read, "I have previously deplored the fact that a jazz singer of Kay Starr's talents should be wasted on inferior material. We suspected that 'commercial considerations' were to

[108] "Kay Starr: Mississippi A Game of Broken Hearts," August 1950, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[109] Ibid.
[110] Ibid.

blame."[111] Though Henshaw categorized Starr as a "jazz singer," she also noted the commercialism that was increasingly present in Starr's music. The music industry was shifting in the 1950s, as jazz and popular music began to separate.[112] Singers, who had typically been put to the side of the stage and sing a few choruses, became increasingly visible. (Some music scholars attribute this to Frank Sinatra's departure from Tommy Dorsey's band and his presence as a solo vocalist at the Paramount Theater in New York in 1944.[113]) Instead of singers backing up the band, the music scene saw bands beginning to serve as the backdrop to solo singers. The tensions between what was seen as "commercial singing" and "authentic singing" were thus heightened.

As Starr's fame increased, she began to fall into this category of solo singer of popular songs. As seen on the 1952 variety show, Starr was backed up by a big band. In fact, many newspapers even referred to Starr as "the female Frankie Laine."[114] Starr's perspective on her background as a "utility singer" had also changed: "I've served my apprenticeship as a gypsy…I want to be around now when my child says 'Mommy, why? Mommy, how?'"[115] Starr claims a mantle of maternal responsibility by juxtaposing her earlier career, which is represented through a racialized figure of itinerancy, to domesticity. Starr again connects to the necessity of providing for her family as a reason to "go commercial" after moving from job to job with singing different styles.

On the popular music scene, record companies raced to secure the next big hit, sometimes pitting singers against each other by releasing different versions of the same song. One such hit

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[111] Laurie Henshaw, "Laurie Henshaw's 'Popular' Reviews," 1951, Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[112] McClellan, *The Later Swing Era, 1942-1955*, 12.
[113] Ibid.
[114] Cronin, "Their Lucky Starr."
[115] "Bio for Capitol Records," October 1959. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

was Starr's recording of "Wheel of Fortune," the song that thrust Starr into stardom and remains one of the songs for which she is most known. Giddins describes Starr's experience with "Wheel of Fortune" as "a classic story of a cover of a cover."[116] The song was written by George Weiss and Ben Benjamin, who originally wrote the song for Johnny Hartman, a black jazz ballad singer, at the RCA record label. The song was not successful, so in December 1951, Eddie Wilcox, the former arranger for Jimmie Lunceford, also produced a version for Sunny Gale, another female pop singer, for the Derby Record Label. Around the same time, Weiss sent a new version of the tune to Capitol records. During the same week that Gale's version of "Wheel of Fortune" was released to stores, Starr was awakened in the middle of the night and told to go to the recording studio. Starr recalls, "I didn't realize there was this big conspiracy going on…They forced me to learn the song and said it had to be recorded that night. My record was out a week after Sonny Gale's. Unfortunately, her record company was smaller so mine became the hit. She don't like me one bit and I'd be afraid to meet her."[117] Starr's account describes some of the politics of the music industry as she became increasingly famous and more "commercial" with her work. Capitol records was in charge of Starr and her career. Starr had to learn "Wheel of Fortune" immediately and record it on the spot so that the song could compete with Gale's version. Women singers often served the bidding of the record companies with which they signed. These companies forced singers into challenging situations for commercial gain, and often positioned women singers against one another. In this instance, Starr's career was bolstered by corporate interests that could undermine competing singers.

Starr eventually left Capitol records for the RCA label in 1955, voicing her resistance to corporate interests and shifts towards rock n' roll. She said, "Capitol had been like a family, but

[116] Giddins, "A Starr is Reborn."
[117] Ibid.

then they wouldn't let me have any say. So RCA came along and though my heart wasn't in it, my heart wasn't in staying at Capitol either."[118] The first song that RCA gave her was "Rock and Roll Waltz," a song she was reluctant to sing and record. Starr reflects on how she thought it was a joke, thinking, "Oh, my God, look at this—one, two, and then rock, one two, and then roll."[119] Starr likened the song to a nursery rhyme, but finally listened to her manager who told her to record the song. Starr reflected:

> …the whole time I did it I thought to myself, "What if this becomes popular? How in the hell am I ever going to present this?" I mean I almost had to take a Dramamine to do it. And oddly enough, nobody ever requested it. Yet I was told that it was the quickest single record to ever go a million at RCA. A writer once called and said, "Do you know you had the first rock hit at RCA?" and I thought, he thinks that's rock? I don't know what it was, but it sure wasn't rock.[120]

Starr presents herself as unwilling to enter aspects of commercial stardom, but does so at the urging of her manager. She continues to present herself as someone used to doing "blood and guts those kinds of songs."[121] She also refers to herself as a passionate singer who engages in meaningful and heart-wrenching songs. However, the nursery rhyme-like nature of "Rock and Roll Waltz" presented her with an internal conflict: to stick to the passionate, bluesy songs of her early career or to record for monetary gain and fame. She decided to record the song. With "Rock and Roll Waltz," Starr soon became known as the first female vocalist to have a rock n' roll hit. While the song is technically a waltz in its form, "Rock and Roll Waltz" also contains rock n' roll riffs. The song reached number one on the *Billboard* single chart and remained there

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[118] Ibid.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid.

for six weeks. Starr's success with "Rock and Roll Waltz" was a signal that another large shift in popular music was happening. The style of rock n' roll was emerging forcefully and gaining popularity with figures like Elvis Presley. Public tastes in music were shifting again. While Starr continued to sing, the height of her stardom was now behind her.

In a *Los Angeles Times* interview with Jack Hawn in 1988, Starr continued to promote an image of authenticity—in this case, one that was opposed to the genre of rock n' roll that infiltrated her career in the 1950s and 1960s. She said, "I sing things that have a beginning, middle and end. Rock, hard rock and acid rock didn't tell a story, just 'I got you, Babe. I got you, Babe.' I was too old to be standing up there going 'I got you Babe.'"[122] Starr framed herself as a storyteller, a singer who presented songs with "a beginning, middle and end." She also utilized her age to point to her authenticity in types of music like jazz that were becoming less popular. She said, "I've tried to sing just about everything—everything but hard rock. When they brought in rock, hard rock, and acid rock, I thought God was trying to tell me it was my turn to get off the stage."[123] Rock music put Starr's versatility at odds with her authenticity. As Oklahoman historian David Dary put it, "Although she became the first female vocalist with a top hit in the rock-and-roll era, her popularity as a recording star began fading with the advent of rock and roll."[124]

Conclusion

The historical and socioeconomic shifts of the post-war era brought about many changes for singers, and Starr was no exception. Popular music continued to have an immense impact on

[122] Hawn, "Lounging Around With Singer Kay Starr."
[123] Ibid.
[124] Dary, *Stories of Old-Time Oklahoma*, 241.

audiences, but Starr did not further pursue the emerging genre of rock n' roll. While Starr's popularity did decline as rock n' roll became the dominant style of popular music, she had a prominent career into the 1990s. Starr herself did not feel she was an "authentic" rock n' roll singer, nor did she fit into the mold of white hypersexualized male stars like Elvis Presley. Instead, she continued to experiment in the genres in which she had asserted her "authenticity": jazz, pop, and country. Her appearance, body, and voice enabled her to continue to appear "authentic" in these genres. She performed her music in many locations nationally and internationally, touring England and the U.S. in 1966, and performing in Las Vegas and Reno hotels.[125] Audiences continued to find connections to Starr's music throughout her entire career, making her music and performances a powerful force in twentieth century history. Through her versatile vocal maneuvering and her carefully crafted presentation of body, voice, and story, she made her contribution as a Native American-Irish jazz singer visible and legible in multiple music genres. Her presence and contributions pushed back against the black-white binary of jazz that was dominant during her career and continues to have power in jazz history.

This chapter has traced Kay Starr's life and musical performances to convey how her vocal versatility, race, class, and gender constantly placed her at the heart of debates about authenticity and musicianship. Starr's versatility across different genres complicates Siegel's notion of "bringing jazz singing back to basics," as shown by the range of music she produced throughout her career (including hillbilly, blues, and romantic ballads), and by the fact that she continued to sing these various genres through the 1990s. Her vocal abilities in diverse genres spread her work far and wide. As jazz critic Gary Giddins reported, "Capitol had a near monopoly on pop singers, and used different color labels for different musical categories. Starr

[125] Larry Birnbaum, *Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock'n'Roll* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2012), 351.

appeared on every color."[126] Starr herself adds, "I was a utility singer because I had tried country, blues—I could sing with Ernie Ford ["I'll Never Be Free" was a big hit] or I could do Dixieland. They figured that the rest of the girls were so stylized…but someone like me could do anything, and they used me as such."[127] Starr's role as a "utility singer" thus enhanced her marketability. Capitol records "used" her vocal versatility for whatever types of songs were most marketable at the time. These comments point to the inherent tensions in producing "authenticity" for the commercial music industry—terrain that Starr had to navigate throughout her career in her participation of different genres of music.

Starr's unique voice and her genre crossings placed her in a complicated space within music history, especially when it came to the history of jazz. To many music historians, her music, voice, and presentation made her an elusive figure. As I have argued, the versatility of Starr's music production and vocal techniques constantly worked against the black-white binary present in jazz, and it continues to present historians with the predicament of where to place Starr in history. As Giddins wrote, "Starr's brassy fusion of urban swing and country twang fixed the attention of several bandleaders in the '30s and 40s and later established her as a "utility singer" (her phrase) able to indemnify almost any kind of song against banality. Yet her versatility offended chroniclers of every genre."[128] Giddins refers to the cultural authorities, in this case white jazz critics and music historians, as frustrated by the fact that Starr did not fit neatly into any genre or category. In fact, her versatile vocal maneuverings were provocative because she defied particular conventions of genre that cultural authorities wanted neatly fixed in place and in

[126] Giddins, *Faces in the Crowd,* 83.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid., 79.

history. This defiance of categories likely contributed to Starr's marginalization within jazz music and in history.

When Starr passed away in November 2016, obituaries in some newspapers commented on Starr's "crossover appeal," while others described her as a "ferociously expressive singer" or "the 'hillbilly' who could sing it all."[129] These newspapers subtly continued to debate aspects of Starr's career, while also trying to categorize her and her music. In one striking example, several newspapers, including *The Guardian*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and *Express*, cited Billie Holiday's assessment of Starr as "the only white girl who could really sing the blues."[130] The endorsement by Holiday, a leading jazz singer during Starr's lifetime and an American icon long considered an authority on jazz, gave Starr credibility as a jazz singer. Yet Holiday also labeled Starr as a "white" exception to the rule that white singers "can't sing the blues." In so doing, Holiday ascribed Starr's authenticity as a jazz singer to her ability to connect to the blues—and therefore to a tradition of music that emerged in African American communities in the late 1800s

[129] See David Belcher, "Kay Starr, Hillbilly Singer With Crossover Appeal, Dies at 94." *The New York Times*, November 3, 2016. Accessed February 25, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/04/arts/music/kay-starr-hillbilly-singer-with-crossover-appeal-dies-at-94.html; Randall Roberts, "Kay Starr, who lit up 1950s pop radio with 'Wheel of Fortune' and 'The Rock and Roll Waltz,' dies at 94." *Los Angeles Times*, November 4, 2016. Accessed February 24, 2017. http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-kay-starr-obituary-singer-20161104-story.html; Adam Bernstein, "Kay Starr, ferociously expressive singer who had pop hit with 'Wheel of Fortune,' dies at 94." *The Washington Post*, November 3, 2016. Accessed February 25, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/music/kay-starr-ferociously-expressive-singer-who-had-pop-hit-with-wheel-of-fortune-dies-at-94/2016/11/03/e456531a-a21d-11e6-a44d-cc2898cfab06_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.e6d70bdb4557; and "Kay Starr 1922 - 2016: The 'hillbilly' who could sing it all." *Express*, November 6, 2016. Accessed February 25, 2017. https://www.express.co.uk/news/obituaries/729243/Kay-Starr-obituary-American-pop-singer.

[130] Donald Clarke, *Wishing on the Moon: The Life and Times of Billie Holiday* (New York: Viking, 1994), 429.

and was rooted in the experiences of slaves.[131] When Holiday claimed Starr as an "exception," she reinforced the notion of jazz as an African American domain while eliding Starr's mixed-race background. That Holiday's comment repeatedly appears in Starr's obituaries shows how notions of authenticity prop up the "fiction" of race. The posthumous circulation of these ideas about Starr continues to hold traction today as writers and historians work to craft her legacy as a musician through debates over race, authenticity, and genre.

[131] Jones, *Blues People*, 65.

Chapter 3

Performances of Gender, Race, and Sexuality in Helen Forrest's Autobiography *I Had the Craziest Dream*

Introduction

The cover of Helen Forrest's autobiography *I Had the Craziest Dream* is almost entirely in gray, black, and white except for the words "Helen Forrest" sprawled in pink cursive font across the top of the page. The book's cover centers a large image of a woman, poised gracefully, singing. Dressed in a long-sleeved, glamorous white dress, the woman's left hand extends towards the audience, putting into view long painted fingernails and a jeweled ring and bracelet. This photo of Forrest in action is boxed in by the images of four prominent, well-remembered jazz musicians: Harry James, Artie Shaw, Benny Goodman, and Dick Haymes. It is perhaps fitting that four male figures surround Forrest's pictures. Her career was both supported and constrained by the choices and actions of these male bandleaders and musicians, as women singers' careers typically were in the 1930s and 1940s. In this cover photo, Forrest is literally enveloped by major male figures in jazz, which serves a dual function: it attempts to legitimize Forrest's story through her association with major jazz men of the Swing Era while simultaneously reflecting her restricted position as a "girl singer."

Helen Forrest, "the voice of the name bands" during the Swing Era, was one of the few singers to write an autobiography of her private life and professional career.[1] Forrest performed with three major big bands during the 1930s and 1940s—Artie Shaw's, Benny Goodman's, and

[1]A few other women singers who wrote autobiographies included Billie Holiday (1956) (to be discussed), Anita O'Day (1981), Nina Simone (2003), Rosemary Clooney (1999), Rose Marie (2003). Many of these autobiographies were written over a decade after Forrest's.

Harry James'—and acquired a great deal of fame. In *Down Beat* polls from 1942 and 1943, fans voted Forrest as the best female vocalist in the United States. Even as one of the few female big band singers to write an autobiography, she largely remains off the historical record, and her story has yet to be critically analyzed in jazz or popular music scholarship.

Women's autobiographies—including Forrest's, written in the 1980s—have frequently been overlooked as sites of scholarly investigation, especially in music history.[2] As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson point out, "Academic and popular historians alike regarded [women's autobiography] as at best a mine of biographical information and salty citations and deemed it too windy and unreliable—since life stories 'stretch' the truth—since be worthy of critical investigation."[3] Yet Forrest's autobiography, when read against the backdrop of jazz history, provides a valuable critical lens on big band jazz culture.[4] Forrest's autobiography is of interest not only as one of the first female jazz autobiographies, but also as illustrative of singers' attempts to shape their public image and the public memory of their life and work. Daniel Stein and Martin Butler have shown how many musicians seek a sense of autonomy and respectability to show the value of their life story with "a concomitant desire to set the record straight," "even if [the autobiography's] production and dissemination are a result of an intricate interplay of a

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[2] A 2015 special issue of *Popular Music and Society* focused on musical autobiographies opened up the conversation of the lack of critical scholarship on musical autobiographies. See Daniel Stein and Martin Butler, "Musical Autobiographies," *Popular Music and Society* 38, no. 2 (2015): 115-121.

[3] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 4-5. In tracing the field of women's life writing, Smith and Watson say that the field "came of age" right around the time Forrest's novel was published.

[4] Forrest's text can be considered in conversation with ideas of jazz criticism. As Nicholas Evans and Krin Gabbard have shown, traditional forms of jazz criticism that solidified in the 1950s typically merge musicology with journalism and aspects of sociology; it was not until the late 1980s that other forms of jazz criticism developed, such as through the lens of cultural studies and poststructural literary theory. See Nicholas M. Evans, *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture in the 1920s* (London: Routledge, 2015), 20-21. See also, Krin Gabbard, ed., *Jazz among the Discourses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

number of different actors involved."[5] Forrest's narration of her life, including her experiences with big bands and their major players, complicates the dominant narrative of jazz history and illuminates what it meant to be a Jewish "girl singer" during the Swing Era. Forrest's autobiography also was a specific performance of the persona she sought to project and had factors, like a target market, implicated in its production. For example, *I Had the Craziest Dream* was published by Coward McCann and Geoghegan in 1982, with the publishers likely trying to capitalize on the popular big band nostalgia of 1970s and 1980s.[6]

Autobiographies were an opportunity for women singers to have some kind of control over the stories that circulated about them in the press, though their authorship was sometimes complicated. For example, Billie Holiday's 1956 autobiography *Lady Sings the Blues* was not solely written by Holiday but instead emerged from conversations between William Dufty and Holiday as well as Dufty's "imaginative engagement" with her interviews that had been published earlier.[7] Though a number of various sources (including Holiday's autobiography) have been instrumental in creating myths about Holiday, Griffin also argues for Holiday's agency in crafting her image as "the tragic, ever-suffering black woman singer who simply stands center stage and naturally sings of her woes."[8] Griffin points to Holiday's autobiography as the prime example of Holiday "selling the story that people wanted to hear," hoping to profit

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[5] Stein and Butler speculate as to some of the reasons why autobiographies have not often been the sites of critical investigation: "The majority of musical autobiographies are produced through processes of collaboration that range from an 'as told to' format to shared writing credits between musician and amanuensis to cases of ghostwriting," which causes some scholars "to regard co-authored works as somewhat inauthentic and as a threat to autobiography's investment in truthfulness" (116). See Stein and Butler, "Musical Autobiographies," 116.
[6] Coward-McCann, Inc. *Brief history of Coward-McCann, Inc., Publishers: 1928-1953* (New York: Coward-McCann), 1953. Coward McCann and Geoghegan was a medium-size publishing house based out of New York and was an imprint of Penguin, a popular press.
[7] See Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 23.
[8] Ibid., 31.

from both her autobiography and potential movie rights.[9] While the picture is complicated, autobiographies did provide one way for singers to have a say in crafting their image and story.

Shaping an autobiography was an act of power in a world where musicians—of any race—could not often control what was being said about them in the press. As Griffin notes, newspaper stories, magazine layouts, and Hollywood film created sensational stories about Holiday that played to the voyeurism of the audience. Although Holiday's autobiography did promote certain myths about her life, "it also sought to address, challenge and provide correctives to stories put forth by the mainstream press, which only focused on her addiction."[10] In some ways, Forrest's autobiography can be understood in a similar light to Holiday's. While the stories about Forrest presented in the newspapers did not depict the same tragedies, much of media coverage of Forrest's life had a similarly voyeuristic dimension, such as the press' fascination with her rhinoplasty and sexual relationships.[11]

Forrest's autobiography illustrates the sexual, racial, and gender politics of the Swing Era music industry, in which the position of "girl singer" required the constant negotiation of identity and relationships. Forrest's navigation of her career and her romance with Harry James showed the unequal power dynamics in the workplace while depicting personal struggles with beauty, appearances, and ethnicity, as well as the complicated feelings and desires that emerge through sexual encounters and relationships. In narrating her life and career, Forrest sheds light on these dynamics, but also crafted her relationship with Billie Holiday both to bolster her career and to

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 36, 46.
[11] See reviews in Helen Forrest, and Bill Libby, *I Had the Craziest Dream*. Coward McCann, 1982. See also reviews such as Lauren Fleishman. "I Had the Craziest Dream (Book)." *Library Journal* 107, no. 9 (May 1982): 891. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCO*host* (accessed July 29, 2017) and "I Had the Craziest Dream." *Publishers Weekly* 221 (1982): 138-139.

define herself as a different type of singer from Holiday. In doing so, she drew upon a longer history of Black–Jewish relations in music.[12] Through depictions of these events in her autobiography, Forrest reclaims stories about her life that appeared in the press. In this case, women's life writing offers an alternative kind of criticism on the sexual, racial, and gender politics of big bands by centering women's voices and experiences.

My approach to analyzing Forrest's autobiography lies at the intersection of performance studies and feminist life writing frameworks, following Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's conceptualization of the intersections between performativity and women's life writing. Building from Judith Butler, Smith and Watson adapt performativity to see "autobiographical occasions as dynamic sites for the performance of identities that become constitutive of subjectivity…identities are not fixed or essentialized attributes of autobiographical subjects; rather, they are enacted and reiterated through cultural norms and discourses, and thus remain provisional and unstable."[13] Forrest's autobiography presents an opportunity to examine the fluidity of performed identities. The strategies through which she narrated her life illuminate her process of identity construction, including the fluctuation of identity markers like whiteness, Jewishness, femininity, and heterosexuality.

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[12] Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999). Melnick argues that the concept of "Black-Jewish relations" emerges at particular times when these groups need to craft a history while also examining "how Jews and African Americans have organized the evidence of their oppression to make public arguments about their relationship to each other and to the American nation at large" (2-3). He argues that certain people "established Jewish agility at expressing and disseminating Black sounds and themes as a product of Jewish suffering and as a variant of Jewish cultural nationalism" (12).

[13] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Madison: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 214. As Butler conceptualizes it, performativity "must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but rather as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (2). See Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (London: Routledge, 2011). 2.

While Forrest's autobiography was a performance with selective narration, her stories, including her relationship to her Jewishness, her relationship with Billie Holiday and African American culture, and her romantic relationship with Harry James, present the reader with alternative understandings of her life and choices. These stories, while they need not be taken at face value, shed light on how Forrest perceived and negotiated the gender, racial, and sexual expectations of "girl singers." By telling these stories, she sought to craft her own image for the public, challenging the stories disseminated in the gossip columns, and thus reshaping public memory.[14]

Negotiating Jewish Identity and Beauty Ideals

In her autobiography, Forrest detailed the conversation between bandleader Artie Shaw and herself after she agreed to marry Al Spieldock, a drummer from Washington D.C. Since Forrest had only been touring with the band for less than a year and her popularity was growing, Shaw asked her to postpone the wedding.[15] Singers who married, he feared, might decide to end their careers to raise families and be homemakers. But Forrest refused, later reflecting: "I said I couldn't do that. His family had planned a wedding and it wouldn't be fair to back out at the last minute. It was going to be a Jewish wedding with a lot of people and I couldn't back out on Al and his family. Artie was Jewish and he knew about family feelings and he understood."[16] Forrest points to a shared connection with Shaw based on Jewish family values and obligations.

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[14] As Will Friedwald points out, "Back in that pre-Streisand day, there was an awful lot of fussing about how both Forrest's nose and name (originally Helen Fogel) had to be changed to hide her Semitic origins. In the same spirit she was compelled to change the color of her hair to a bright shiska blond and presented herself in the most extravagant gowns—Earl Wilson once devoted an entire column to describing how her costumery prevented her from sitting down" (593). See Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*, 593.
[15] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 37.
[16] Ibid., 73.

It is this understanding that allowed her to negotiate for time away from the band for her "Jewish wedding."

Throughout her autobiography, Forrest expressed an ambivalent relationship to her Jewish identity, trying both to assert and to hide her Jewish roots. She mobilized tropes such as the "nice Jewish girl" and "typical Jewish mother" to express her complicated relationship to her ethnicity. Yet she also sought to emulate the white Euro-American beauty ideals of the 1930s and 1940s, to the extent that she invested in an elective rhinoplasty. While she sometimes challenged essentialist ideas of Jewishness, she also drew on her Jewish identity to connect with other Jewish performers in the jazz scene, such as Artie Shaw and Harry James.

In her autobiography, Forrest constantly criticized her mother's parenting and moral values while describing her mother in relation to "typical Jewishness." Forrest stated that her mother would say, "You should sleep with a producer. That's what a singer has to do to be a big star. Dinah Shore slept with a producer and she's a big star."[17] When Forrest recalled this moment with her mother, she linked the common assumption that singers "sleep their way to the top" to her mother's views on success. At that moment, Forrest demurred: "As far as I know, Dinah never slept with a producer. I tell the story because it's so typical of my mother to say something like this to me. It may not be typical of the typical Jewish mother, but it was typical of my mother."[18] Forrest presents her mother as separate from "the typical Jewish mother," whose image is "excessive, overprotective, neurotically anxious, and ever present… also was an emblem of unstinting love and devotion."[19] Instead, Forrest emphasizes both her mother's Jewishness and her ruthlessness. As a singer in particular, Forrest could have an advantage

[17] Ibid., 42.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Joyce Antler, *You Never Call! You Never Write!: A History of the Jewish Mother* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 23-24.

among the competition if she were to sleep with a producer, something especially important in the increasingly competitive economy. Forrest presents her mother in a negative light while suggesting that her career success was attained independently and without using her sexuality.

While both of her parents were Jewish, Forrest's Jewish identity came primarily from her relationship with her mother, as she presented herself as a "good Jewish girl" with a connection to a "typical Jewish mother." When her mother moved in with her, Forrest explained: "I don't know why I did all this, but, after all that had been between us, she was still my mother. I guess that's what a good Jewish girl is supposed to do, be good to her mother…She never encouraged me to be a singer…but when it happened she was a typical Jewish mother—my daughter this and my daughter that to everyone she met."[20] Because this depiction contradicted her depiction of her mother's views on success and sexuality, Forrest presented "the typical Jewish mother" as malleable but still embodying some essential characteristics of Jewish womanhood. She also projects herself as loyal to her mother, drawing upon essentialized Jewishness for her own identity.

Forrest also narrates moments when she sheds connections to her family and her Jewish heritage to perform non-ethnic whiteness through her name, a site of racial performativity. Forrest took actions—most dramatically, changing her name—that publicly distanced her from her Jewish heritage, promoting a non-Jewish whiteness against an anti-Semitic backdrop. The post-World War I years had seen a heightened antisemitism in America, exacerbated by the economic and social hardships of the Great Depression.[21] Many institutions—including schools

[20] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 41-42.
[21] Jonathan D. Sarna and Jonathan Golden, "The American Jewish Experience in the Twentieth Century: Antisemitism and Assimilation," *Diving America: Religion in American History*. National Humanities Center, 2000.

and places of employment—mandated quotas and restrictions against Jews.[22] Jewish people, like many other immigrants, were discriminated against as part of a larger wave of late nineteenth-century racism in the United States.[23] Forrest's name change provided some protection against the cultural and legal discrimination still rampant in New York City in the 1930s. When Forrest got a slot in a local radio show in New York City, a saxophone player told her that her last name—Fogel—was "too Jewish."[24] Forrest described the moment of her name change: "Moments before I went on, a sax man whispered he didn't like my name, it sounded too Jewish or something. He suggested I should take a stage name…In a few seconds, on an impulse, my name was changed forever from Helen Fogel to Helen Forrest. I never had it changed legally, but I've used it, even on legal papers, ever since."[25] While passive voice obscures who chose "Forrest" instead of "Fogel" for her name—the saxophone player or Forrest herself—Forrest alludes to the pressure she felt to take a new name.[26] By using her stage name in legal papers, Forrest eliminated an association with Jewishness. Further, the rise of technologies like the

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Karen Brodkin points to the fact that there was a shift in institutional policies that "reconfigured the category of whiteness to include European immigrants," including Jews. See Karen Brodkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 26. Matthew Frye Jacobson has argued that during this time Jews were given "provisional" or "probationary" kind of whiteness, and David Roediger has argued that this attribution presented Jews as "inbetween peoples." However, in the context of the Forrest's case, performing non-Jewish whiteness proved to be beneficial for her career. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), and David R. Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (New York: Basic, 2005), 13. Roediger attributes the phrase "inbetween peoples" to John Hingham and Robert Orsi.
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[24] Jan Shapiro, "Helen Forrest," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, Mar. 1, 2009. Jewish Women's Archive. Accessed Apr. 19, 2018. <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/forrest-helen>.

[25] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 45.

[26] Other sources confirm that Forrest herself changed her name, but that she was strongly "encouraged" to do so. See Shapiro, "Helen Forrest."

microphone also brought with them the expectation that performers present "non-ethnic" whiteness through their sound.[27] Forrest's actions suggest that she believed her Jewish-sounding name would make her less marketable and would dampen her chances of success on the radio. The performance of non-ethnic whiteness was thus important for the success of big band singers. Therefore, Forrest altered signifiers of her Jewishness, such as her name, in order to become assimilable.

Even as Jews experienced much discrimination, the turn of the twentieth century saw an increase in the number of Jewish entertainers, many of whom found a niche in performing music with African American roots. Following Michael Rogin, Nicholas Evans points out that many Jews sought careers in entertainment including vaudeville, cabarets, radio, and cinema, which helped them "to avoid (and perhaps decrease) interethnic conflict as well as to obtain material security and advancement."[28] Jewish bandleaders like Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw were drawn to swing music as egalitarian urban jazz music that was made available to the middle and working classes.[29] Shaw in particular pursued big band work "as an escape from both his parents' Jewish identity and the narrow bigotry and anti-Semitism of Christian America."[30] Many first and second generation musicians were drawn to the egalitarianism swing music represented, as the music moved across boundaries of class, race, and ethnicity.[31] Some Jewish people were even

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[27] As McCracken points out, "The increased clarity of the electrical sound acted as a technology of assimilation in this political context, in which those singers who spoke in "plain" English with clear diction were rewarded and promoted. As a result, first-generation immigrants and anyone with a pronounced ethnic, regional, urban, or class accent largely disappeared from mainstream recordings" (93). See Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don't Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).
[28] Evans, *Writing Jazz*, 129. See also, Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996).
[29] Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 81.
[30] Ibid.
[31] See Stowe, *Swing Changes*.

viewed as "cultural bridges" between white and black worlds.[32] Evans argues, "Part of the success of some Jewish-American performers involved their strategic negotiation of racial/cultural discourses."[33] Forrest, too, maneuvered these discourses. When Forrest recounts her name change in the 1980s, she draws attention to the industry politics that placed her in such a position of negotiating markers of identity in order to pursue her career.

For Forrest, being a Jewish woman and a big band singer forced her to navigate both Hollywood's celebrity beauty ideals, sounding "ethnic," and networks of established musicians that included Jews and African Americans. Since her position as a big band singer was not just vocal but also visual, she was still held to the same Euro-American white beauty standard as other "girl singers." Michael Rogin has argued that Al Jolson, a Jewish blackface minstrel who played "the jazz singer," "became white" by performing Black music in blackface, an act which served to "Americanize" Jewish immigrants during an anti-Semitic era.[34] Forrest, however, performed mainstream whiteness through her song choice such as in the romantic ballads she sang, her sound on the radio, and her appearance. Instead of distancing herself from Jewishness through appropriation of African American culture, she actively defined herself against it.

However, refashioning herself in terms of mainstream whiteness meant that she became easily replaceable in her early career, as performances of middle-class whiteness became the radio industry standard. As Joy Elizabeth Hayes argues, even though there were many different representations of gender, race, and ethnicity during the Golden Age of radio, performances of whiteness through radio shows also emerged during the late 1920s and expanded through the

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[32] See Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 72. See also, Evans, *Writing Jazz*, and Eric Porter, *What is this Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2002).
[33] Evans, *Writing Jazz*, 129.
[34] See Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*.

1950s.[35] Forrest sometimes sang under anonymous names, and later was known as "Bonnie Blue" and "The Blue Lady of Song" when she sang for WCBS radio in 1934.[36] Some radio stations required that her "real" identity remain apart from the one she performed on the radio. Forrest wrote, "The identity of Bonnie Blue was kept secret. Mark [Warnow] wanted it that way. He was the star. Whoever sang with him used the name. I sneaked in and out of back doors of the studio so nobody would see me. If anybody had, he wouldn't have known who I was. But I was told I'd be fired if I told anybody who I was."[37] Forrest blames Warnow, the Jewish bandleader of the Blue Velvet Orchestra, for the fact that her real identity had to be kept a secret. On Warnow's show, women singers went by the name "Bonnie Blue," enabling those on the show to become interchangeable as radio moved toward more generic performances.

Without the protection of her "real" or public identity, Forrest was more vulnerable to being fired, as she could be framed as just another white singer. After refusing to sing uptempo "jump" tunes, Forrest was let go. "I found out I wasn't important as I thought I was," she recalled. "Anybody can be replaced. Benay Venuta replaced me and went on to do very well. I don't know that anyone even noticed there was a new Bonnie Blue. They also added a new male singer, Buddy Clark. I like to think that it took two singers to replace me."[38] Forrest's body/voice could easily be replaced since her identity as "Helen Forrest" was erased on the radio when she became "Bonnie Blue," a generic radio star. Michele Hilmes has argued that through radio shows in the late 1930s and into the 1940s, networks promoted "non-ethnic 'white,' middle-class"

[35] Joy Elizabeth Hayes, "White Noise: Performing the White, Middle-Class Family on 1930s Radio." *Cinema Journal*, 51, no. 3 (2012): 99.
[36] Shapiro, "Helen Forrest."
[37] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 46.
[38] Ibid., 46-47.

material.[39] By keeping "Bonnie Blue" as a consistent female voice in the context of trends towards white, middle-class material, male executives and bandleaders like Warnow could easily dismiss singers who refused any requests.

Forrest also performed whiteness by transforming her body in line with white Euro-American beauty ideals, pursuing a rhinoplasty to attain what she saw as "conventional beauty."[40] In her autobiography, she details her struggles with her appearance and emphasizes wanting to be "beautiful for Harry [James]."[41] Dominant cultural forms like women's magazines conveyed the standards of white idealized beauty to which female singers and Hollywood stars were held, and magazines of the 1930s often featured beauty advice columns that encouraged women to use cosmetics and makeup to change their appearances.[42] Sarah Berry has argued that in Hollywood, ethnicity was ranked in terms of assimilability, with those of Castilian Spanish descent being the most ideal.[43] Singers were held to similar standards. As Forrest pointed out, "To many, we were big as movie stars."[44] For an ethnically Jewish female big band singer like Forrest, "conventional beauty" by white-European standards could be difficult to obtain. According to dominant beauty ideals in the 1930s, Jewish women could possess exotic beauty

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[39] Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 107.

[40] Eliza Berman, "This Is What the Ideal Woman Looked Like in the 1930s. *Time*, Jun. 1, 2015. In 1938 in the U.S., *LIFE Magazine* reported some of these 1930s beauty ideals: "With the recent return of the romantic influence in clothes, the soft feminine figure is again back in style. Now, though the ideal figure must have a round, high bosom, a slim but not wasp-like waist, and gently rounded hips."

[41] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 138.

[42] Sarah Berry, *Screen Style: Fashion and Femininity in 1930s Hollywood* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 106. As Elizabeth Matelski argues, "By the early 1930s, the basic beauty institutions of American culture had been established—fashion, cosmetics, modeling, beauty contests, and Hollywood" (16). See Elizabeth M. Matelski, *Reducing Bodies: Mass Culture and the Female Figure in Postwar America* (Milton Park: Taylor & Francis, 2017).

[43] Berry, *Screen Style*, 112. She argues, "Like the Mediterranean-influenced French and Italian, the Spanish were seen as both exotic and European" (112).

[44] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 23.

but had "deviant" facial features, specifically, the nose.[45] Though Jewish women were eventually perceived in terms of whiteness, as scholars such as Matthew Frye Jacobson and David Roediger have argued, some Jewish women sought to alter non-white, non-Euroamerican facial features through rhinoplasty.[46] Rhinoplasty did not become popular until the 1950s and 1960s, so when Helen Forrest had her surgery in the 1940s, she was one of the earlier individuals to alter her "ethnic appearance."[47] How public celebrities and discourse determined the beauty of physical features was shifting and arbitrary, but had real, material outcomes on the choices that celebrity women—including Forrest—made to uphold beauty standards.

By keeping the newspaper excerpts alongside her own recounting of her rhinoplasty, she also shows the intense physical scrutiny directed at Jewish female celebrities and forces the contemporary reader to grapple with it. Her account insists on honesty about her rhinoplasty operation:

> I lost it to a New York doctor. I have never talked about this before, but I want to be honest in my book. It's no secret, anyway. In his *New York Daily Mirror* syndicated column, Walter Winchell wrote late in December 1942: "Helen Forrest, vocalist for Harry James, is now a 'looker' since her prettifying job on the coast."[48]

Newspapers of the time affirmed her choice to distance herself from physical signifiers of Jewishness as part of ideal beauty and glamour to which band singers were expected to adhere. A newspaper story in *Down Beat* (January 1943) titled "Helen Forrest's New Nose Clicks"

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[45] Ellis Cashmore, ed., *Encyclopedia of Race and Ethnic Studies* (London: Routledge, 2004), 50-51.
[46] See Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, and Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*. See also Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Trenton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
[47] Matelski, *Reducing Bodies*, 109.
[48] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 139.

reported, "Helen Forrest, America's No. 1 lark, emerged as a glamour girl here as she made her first public appearance [at the Palladium] since a plastic surgeon chiseled the Forrest physiognomy into a more becoming outline. Most of the work was performed on Helen's nose, hitherto valuable essentially for breathing and blowing purposes, but now perching piquantly on Helen's attractively pert puss."[49] The *Down Beat* author refers to Forrest emergence as "a glamour girl" after her surgery, assessing her change in appearance as a way to exhibit ideal beauty and in contrast to her previous look. To the media reports, Forrest comments, "Well, that's the way they wrote in those magazines in those days."[50] By including these articles in her autobiography, she shows the powerful force of the media, which put singers' appearances and choices under a microscope. Forrest also shows how the media constantly invaded singers' privacy, saying that her "secret [of the rhinoplasty] was shared with no more than a few hundred thousand fans."[51]

In terms of her rhinoplasty, Forrest rebelled against gendered and ethnic expectations of being "a nice Jewish girl," yet still underwent surgery to adhere to a specific gendered and racialized standard of beauty of white Euroamerican beauty ideals. In her autobiography, Forrest affirms her background and identity as Jewish, but distances herself from physical signifiers of Jewishness—particularly her nose—which she saw as undesirable and unattractive. Forrest recalled her experience meeting a Jewish doctor in Chicago who said, "'Helen, you're a nice Jewish girl, you look like a nice Jewish girl, you shouldn't change the way you look.'…I said to him, 'I don't mind being Jewish. I'm happy to be Jewish. I tell everyone I'm Jewish. I'll wear a Jewish star. But I don't want to be a nice Jewish girl. I don't want to look like a nice Jewish girl.

[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid., 140.

I don't want my nice Jewish nose.'"[52] Forrest's comments convey a sense of rebellion against both looking Jewish and the gendered expectations that accompanied her background and upbringing—against being "a nice Jewish girl." In this case, being "a nice Jewish girl" manifested itself mainly through appearance: Forrest had dark brown hair and a prominent nose. The doctor defines the qualities of "a nice Jewish girl" in ways that enforced a presumed passivity and femininity. Forrest, however, chose to pursue the operation. Sarah Hayes has argued that plastic surgery erased ethnicity in singers such as Forrest and Italian-American singer Vic Damone, therefore allowing them to be "ordinary" and "conventionally beautiful."[53] Ethnically Jewish women who altered their facial features could assimilate through whiteness and have access to the mainstream. The "inbetweenness" that accompanied Jewishness enabled them to tap into the privileges of whiteness.

In her autobiography, Forrest represented the rhinoplasty as an act of bravery and personal agency. As she wrote, "It wasn't nearly as common in those days as it is today and it took guts to go, but I was determined."[54] For Forrest, the rhinoplasty as a way to empower herself and to advance her career. Nonetheless, her surgery was not a private affair; it also garnered a great deal of attention from the press. In the 1940s, magazines like *Down Beat* regularly reported the plastic surgery procedures of singers and celebrities.[55] Thus any changes to Forrest's appearance would be highly publicized and would elicit responses that could affect her career. Though Forrest conformed to the mainstream pressures of the beauty industry by "erasing" her ethnicity in the 1940s, her decision to include it in her autobiography in the 1980s

[52] Ibid., 139.
[53] Elaine M. Hayes, "To Bebop or to be Pop: Sarah Vaughan and the Politics of Crossover," PhD. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004. 89-90.
[54] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 138-9.
[55] Hayes, "To Bebop or to be Pop," 89-90.

can be viewed as an assertion of power in which Forrest describes her surgery on her own terms. Her account acts as an explanation for distancing herself from her Jewishness when there was a great deal of anti-Semitic sentiment, especially because she also aligns herself with other Jewish musicians. By framing herself as "going against the grain" of her time and then commenting on the fact that cosmetic surgery is now the norm for women celebrities, she presents herself as an innovator and a modern woman.[56]

While Forrest sought to minimize signifiers of her Jewishness in some contexts, she also drew upon ethnic connections to justify how she was a good musical "fit" for certain bands with Jewish bandleaders—Harry James' band in particular. Forrest wrote, "I don't know what instinct drew me to Harry, but I loved the way he played, especially on ballads. He had this Yiddish type of phrasing, very 'schmaltzy,' as they called it."[57] Forrest narrates her attraction to James' band as due to James' "Jewish sound." She presents this desire as instinctual, therefore attempting to demonstrate an inherent connection between the two musicians based on Jewish identity. Other sources, such as George T. Simon's *The Big Bands*, have reported Forrest saying, "I loved the way [Harry] played the trumpet, with that Jewish phrasing, and I thought I'd fit right in with the band."[58] Forrest draws on her Jewish identity to place herself as having a connection to

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[56] Forrest later drew attention to the gendered expectations of the body's beauty in older age as well, but described alterations to her aging body framed through the pursuit of happiness. She said, "…I had my eyes done and my chin done. For a while I was one of the best customers the plastic surgeons had. They call them cosmetic surgeons now, and it no longer is considered embarrassing to go to them. I was happier with the way I looked later, but I was never really happy with the way I looked. I think it's important to be happy with yourself and the way you look. I don't think that it's any crime to want to look the best you can" (133). Forrest notes how public attitudes towards cosmetic surgery have shifted to become more accepting of alterations of women's bodies. She focuses on internal choice as opposed to external pressures and standards in order to locate self-satisfaction. In this way, she justifies her later operations in pursuit of happiness. See Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 133.

[57] Ibid., 111.

[58] George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Schirmer Trade Books, 2012).

successful Jewish bandleaders and to claim a place in larger jazz history. As a Jewish jazz singer, Forrest claims she could add to the distinctive sound created by James and his band.

In Forrest's singing, she often projected a warm sound through emotional ballads in a way that served to align herself with James' band's music. The description of James' music as "schmaltzy," a word of Yiddish origin, suggests a sense of "excessive sentimentality" that was conveyed through his music.[59] Forrest fit into this picture through her vocal techniques in such songs as "Make Love to Me," "I Cried for You," and "I Had the Craziest Dream," during which her voice participated in an active interplay with the sound of James' trumpet and with his band as a whole. For example, in "Make Love to Me," Forrest's voice against the backdrop of the strings and horns complements the sentimental mood of the tune. The opening of the song features James' muted trumpet before Forrest's voice comes in on the lines: "Instead of making conversation/Make love to me/Make love to me."[60] Her voice slides downward on the word "my" and includes vibrato on a short note, conveying a sense of fluttering excitement and anticipation. Forrest leans in to the notes on the second articulation of the line "make love to me," placing emphasis on the word "love" in a sensual way. In between the lines, she includes "oh" on certain lines to add to the sentimentality and the longing the song's message conveys. Forrest swoops on many notes and falls off others to add to these feelings. These feelings are also conveyed through long drawn-out notes and emphasized phrases like "my darling." At the end of the song, she retards the line "I'm so in love with you" on an upward scale to escalate the song's feelings at its conclusion. In this interpretation of the song, Forrest conforms to the

[59] "Schmaltz." *Oxford Dictionaries, English*. https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/schmaltz
[60] Helen Forrest with the Harry James Orchestra. *Make Love to Me*. 1942.

standards of sentimental ballads while also playing into the "schmaltzy" interpretations of James' music, and by extension, presents herself as aligning with standards of Jewish popular music.

Forrest negotiated her Jewish identity throughout her career, and she conveyed an ambivalence about it through her autobiography. This demonstrates the challenges that Jewish women performers had to face during the early-to-mid twentieth century. By writing her family, and her mother specifically, both within and against stereotypes of Jewishness, Forrest presented herself as both within and outside of that identity. While sometimes relying on stereotypes about Jewish women, at other moments, she drew upon her Jewish upbringing and challenging family situations to make herself appear exceptional and to put herself in a larger network of Jewish performers. Forrest also expressed a tense relationship to signifiers of Jewishness, justifying moments when she "erased" Jewishness in her career and pitching her actions as both a necessity and a choice. Her depiction of her Jewish identity was an integral part for her larger narration about her role in jazz, as it played a part in how she positioned herself in relation to other musicians like Artie Shaw, Harry James, and Billie Holiday. Forrest's vocal interpretations, too, aligned with James' "schmaltzy" music style to place her within the Jewish popular music scene.

Forrest and Holiday's Contrasting Accounts of Time on the Road Together

I was scared half to death. My knees were shaking so I could hardly board the bus for St. Louis. But I got there. Artie explained to me that Billie Holiday was still with the band but was getting ready to go out on her own. He was willing to take me on even before Billie left. I said I was ready. That was in September 1938 and my real life was beginning.[61]

The ways that Forrest narrated her Jewish identity also intersected with her attempts to promote solidarity with African Americans in the fight against racism. However, at the same

[61] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 51.

time, Forrest differentiated herself from African American singers to promote her individuality, unique life experiences, whiteness—particularly through her singing styles and vocal techniques. Many historical narratives about jazz music emphasize Jewish musicians as mediators and cultural bridges, occupying and in-between space between "black" and "white" worlds; in some ways, Forrest tried to position herself in a longer history of relationships between Jews and African Americans while also highlighting her distinct place in jazz history separate from African American music and culture.[62] When she wrote about her time on the road with Billie Holiday, she depicted their relationship as close and cordial even as she separated herself from Holiday's "troubles"—her struggles with addition, run-ins with the law, and challenging upbringing. However, Holiday actively resisted this depiction of their relationship in interviews and through her autobiography, painting a tense relationship in which Forrest benefitted from racial discrimination against Holiday.

Scholarship on "Black-Jewish relations" has shown how Jews have constructed narratives that presumed "natural" connections between African Americans and Jews, insisting on a special relationship between the two groups. These "black-Jewish affinity narratives" have been mobilized to challenge the nature of ethnic and racial divisions.[63] Charles Hersch has argued that Jews have identified with African Americans as a means to resist assimilation; "they engaged with black culture in order to avoid "melting" into an American mainstream they considered bland and intolerant, and to 're-minoritize' Jewishness."[64] Many Jewish jazz musicians and critics such as Ben Sidran, Leonard Feather, Nat Hentoff, felt an affinity with both African Americans and jazz music based on their experiences as Jews with a shared history of

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[62] See Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*.
[63] Charles Hersch, "'Every time I try to play black, it comes out sounding Jewish': Jewish Jazz Musicians and Racial Identity," *American Jewish History* 97, no. 3 (2013): 281.
[64] Ibid., 263.

discrimination.[65] By contrast, Jeffrey Melnick rejects the notion of a special affinity between Jews and African Americans, arguing that Jewish musicians such identifications masked Jewish exploitation of African American musicians and appropriation of their music.[66] While Forrest did not directly exploit Holiday, she did profit at her expense: Forrest replaced Holiday as the main singer in Artie Shaw's band.

The differences in the two singers' portrayal of one another is striking. While Holiday highlighted her own strength and endurance, as well as Forrest's lack of solidarity, in a period of racial inequality, Forrest bolstered her own career and credibility by claiming a friendship with Holiday even as she crafted an image and musical identity distinct from that of African Americans. The differences emerged from their respective experiences that were intricately tied to their racial identities, as well as their respective place in the jazz world at large at the time when they published their autobiographies. When Holiday published *Lady Sings the Blues* in 1956, she had achieved widespread fame. Forrest, by contrast, once known as "the voice of the name bands," had declined in popularity by the 1950s, and published her book only in 1982.[67] Holiday depicted the men in the band as supportive and Forrest as jealous and racist. Forrest, by contrast, narrated their relationship as friendly and blamed racial inequality for any distance between them. These contrasting accounts challenge expectations of a "Black-Jewish affinity" and reveal the ways the singers leveraged their relationships to advance particular stories about race, gender, music, and their position as big band singers.

Forrest presented Holiday as being kind to her while emphasizing that the two of them were not in competition, drawing upon Holiday's legacy to promote her own career. As

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[65] Ibid., 265-6.
[66] See Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*.
[67] Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*, 595.

discussed earlier, Holiday had acquired a great deal of enduring fame by the time Forrest's book was written in 1982. In her descriptions, she claimed Holiday stood up for her, attempting to paint a harmonious picture of their relationship. Forrest wrote, "She treated me well. The band's vocal arrangements were written for her, so I sat around. She'd say to Artie, 'Why don't you let this child sing?' He'd say, 'She hasn't got any arrangements yet.' And she'd say, 'Well, let her use mine. But don't let her sit there doing nothing all night.'"[68] Forrest depicted Holiday's role in teaching her how to advocate for herself as a vocalist. In doing so, she marketed herself as learning from a master vocalist in jazz history. This gave Forrest more legitimacy as a singer. In showing that Holiday promoted Forrest's singing, Forrest not only sought to present their relationship as agreeable, but also showed her training with Artie Shaw's band as learning from and singing the arrangements of an icon in American jazz history.

Holiday depicted the lack of solidarity with Forrest through descriptions of their time touring together, showing the hardships that emerged from the fraught black-Jewish relations of two big band singers. Holiday described life on the road as a constant grind, made more onerous by her proximity to Forrest. She depicted the nonstop schedule and tricks the group used to save money on the road. She wrote, "This would have been fine except that I had to double up with another vocalist. I don't think she liked Negroes much, and especially not me. She didn't want to sleep in the same room with me. She only did because she had to."[69] Holiday narrated Forrest's resistance to sleeping in the same room as Holiday to highlight the hardships of touring on a budget as a black vocalist with an all-white band. Holiday hints at a potential for solidarity in their position as "girl singers," but then describes Forrest as racist. When Holiday emphasizes

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[68] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 58-59.
[69] Billie Holiday with William Dufty, *Lady Sings the Blues* (New York: Penguin, 1956), 85.

Forrest's distaste for sharing space with her, she illustrates the uneven power dynamic of vocalists according to race, and points out lost moments for connection and solidarity based on gender and position. This depiction promotes Holiday's endurance in her career despite the racism she encountered on the road.

When Holiday described the racism and sexism she experienced on tour, she also framed Forrest as taking advantage of racial segregation to advance her own career. This depiction showcased Forrest's white privilege and conveyed a sense of competition among "girl singers" that disadvantaged Holiday. She wrote, "There were some places where the management wouldn't let me appear, and I'd have to sit in the bus while she did the numbers that were arranged for me. She was always happy when she could sing and I couldn't."[70] Because Forrest's white privilege allowed her to perform in venues where Holiday could, Holiday also lost some of her musical material to Forrest. By framing Forrest as reveling in Holiday's struggles, Holiday draws attention to the racial dynamics embedded in competition among "girl singers" on tour together. Not only did Holiday's career suffer because she was unable to perform in certain venues, but she depicts Forrest's reactions and subsequent success as additional hardships that undermined her own career.

Holiday's narrative illustrated the impossibility of solidarity between the two singers, despite the fact that they were both women. Holiday described Forrest's contentment at the racially discriminative policies of "a fancy boys' school in New England": "She was real happy because she was sure I was going to have to sit in the bus all night again because I was too black and sexy for those young boys."[71] When the singers found out that the boys school did not want any female singers regardless of race, Holiday recounted, "The two of us had to sit in the bus

[70] Ibid., 85-86.
[71] Ibid., 86.

together all night and listen to the band playing our songs."[72] Likely, jazz's association with sexuality[73]—and the danger of female bodies in particular—was what caused their exclusion from the all boys' school. Holiday told the reader, "Did I razz her! 'You see, honey…you're so fine and grand. You may be white, but you're no better than me. They won't have either of us here because we're both women."[74] Angela Davis has argued that Holiday, along with other blues women, articulated a nascent black feminist consciousness through her musical interpretations.[75] This expression of feminist consciousness also manifested in Holiday's comments, as she pointed to the potential of this moment for solidarity based on gender and position in the band, and then critiqued Forrest's supremacist attitude and presented the two as equals: "you're no better than me." Holiday insists that the reader understand both racial and gender discrimination present in her experiences. In addition, she showcases the rift between Forrest and herself to promote her own grit, having had to endure both racial and gender discrimination on tour. Instead of this instance of gender discrimination being one of solidarity, it is one of increased division for the singers. This example reinforces the struggles that women singers faced and showcased that gender solidarity had limits in terms of cutting across racial lines.

Holiday also conveyed Forrest's sense of competition and jealousy towards Holiday, especially when it came to vocal styles and techniques. "Artie had asked me to help her to phrase her lyrics; this made her jealous. Then once I made the mistake of telling somebody we got along

[72] Ibid., 85-86.
[73] See Fiona Ngô, *Imperial Blues: Geographies of Race and Sex in Jazz Age New York* (Durham Duke University Press, 2014).
[74] Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 86.
[75] Davis, *Blues Women and Black Feminism*, xv.

fine, and to prove it I mentioned how she let me help her phrase. This made her sore."[76] Because lyric phrasing was connected to a singer's signature style, it could become a source of tension in the midst of competition among singers. This narration puts Holiday in a position of power and leadership, framed as sharing her advice and style because of their good relationship. Holiday depicted Forrest as envious and racist. While Holiday presents herself as a team player taking an opportunity to assist Forrest, she comments on Forrest's increased hostility towards her well-meaning deed. In doing so, Holiday does not present herself as in competition with Forrest but instead as her teacher: tension emerges from the fact that in the era of Jim Crow, a black woman acted as leader and teacher to a white woman, both of whom were sharing/competing for the "girl singer" spot in Artie Shaw's band. This depiction gestures towards Holiday as originator and Forrest as imitator, bringing attention to white appropriation of black styles of music. As Angela Davis has argued, Holiday—through music and lyric interpretation, or her "aesthetic process"—transformed white popular music ballads into expressions that could both "confirm and subvert racist and sexist representations of women in love."[77] In doing so, she conveyed complex meanings about black female sexuality, individuality, freedom, and love to her audiences.[78]

The ways Forrest narrated their relationship was quite different. Forrest depicted some similarities between her and Holiday, but also distinguished herself from hardships Holiday faced to show their diverging experiences based on race. For example, though Forrest gestures to the fact that both she and Holiday had challenging upbringings, she associates Holiday's childhood with a world of degradation: "She'd had a hard time in her life, reared in a

[76] Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 85-86.
[77] Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, 161-164.
[78] Ibid., 162-165.

whorehouse, raped at ten, arrested for prostitution at fourteen, starving in Harlem at sixteen when she started to sing in New York's small clubs…If my childhood was hard, hers was harder."[79] Forrest reiterated dominant narratives about Holiday's tragic upbringing and childhood experiences—the origin, in her account, of Holiday's ability to authentically "sing the blues" through her music. She wrote, "All she'd been through showed through in her singing. 'Lady Day' was a lady with a lot of dignity, but white audiences saw only her color and didn't hear her singing."[80] In distinguishing her own experiences from Holiday's, she also emphasized key differences between the two singers and their music. In contrast to the tragic African American jazz singer who was not always received well by white audiences, Forrest emerged in her own text as an enduring white jazz singer who had seen her share of hardships but performed swing music successfully for mainstream audience entertainment. These differences allowed her to market herself differently to white audiences, especially since singers' authenticity was often predicated on how the public and critics viewed their connection to "authentic" racialized jazz and blues singing.

Despite the similar position they held as female singers in Shaw's band, Forrest blamed race and economic necessity as the reasons for the disconnect between Holiday and Forrest. She wrote, "I was new in the business and I didn't want to get into the color wall that followed us around. It was so much easier for me just because I was white."[81] While Forrest acknowledged her white privilege while touring with the big band, she also excused herself from having to deal

[79] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 57.
[80] Ibid., 57. Forrest also points to the visual elements of performance that centralized skin color and restricted Holiday's career success.
[81] Ibid., 58.

with racial discrimination on the road because she was "new."[82] She suggested that standing up for Holiday would have been at the expense of her own career. Forrest also described her in-action as economic necessity: "Maybe we should have backed Billie better, but we couldn't play in the black places and if we didn't play the white places we had no place to play. Some places canceled us out when they found out about Billie…Sometimes red-neck cops or sheriffs ordered her out even when the audiences wanted to see her."[83] Because Forrest is writing in her autobiography, she has the space to be reflective about race and can showcase her reasons for not being in solidarity with Holiday. Forrest pointed to racial segregation's effects on white bands ("we couldn't play the black places") as well as the large expenses of big band travel generally. Forrest prioritized her own career success over solidarity with Holiday.

Forrest also focused on the impact of touring logistics instead of the impact of racial discrimination, which sometimes served to minimize Holiday's experience. She wrote, "The funny thing is everyone says [Holiday] finally gave up when the band got to New York for its big opening at the Lincoln Hotel and she wasn't allowed to sit on the stand, but the fact is there wasn't any room for any singers on the bandstand and we both waited at a table up front for our

[82] Despite describing the many hardships Holiday endured throughout her life, Forrest later confirmed her jealousy of Holiday's talent and life. She confessed, "I envied her singing, if not her life. I found her a good gal… She was tough, but her life with the band was tougher" (58). Forrest acknowledged the inequalities that existed between them because of race, but also narrated her willful compliance with the way things were. It is important that Forrest frames Holiday's departure as not being able to handle the challenges of show business rather than describing her choice to perform with different groups. In this way, Forrest undermined Holiday's agency. When Forrest creates a scenario in which Holiday could not handle show business, she does not account for all of the things Holiday did do despite the racism she faced. One of Holiday's next endeavors would be at Café Society, which would be where she sang "Strange Fruit," a pointed protest of the lynching of black people in the South. See Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 58.

[83] Ibid., 57-58.

turn. Maybe the fuss was because we sat together."[84] Forrest shifts the attention from the ongoing racial discrimination Holiday faced while touring with Shaw's band, which even Forrest reflects on in her memoir at other points. Instead, she focuses on staging logistics and speculates that a black and white singer existing in the same space triggered a response from the audience and hotel personnel.

When Forrest inserts her own recollection of this event, she de-emphasizes a famous moment of Holiday's agency—leaving Shaw's band. Holiday told reporters of *The Amsterdam News* a different account of her departure: "I was billed next to Artie himself…'but was never allowed to visit the bar or the dining room, as did the other members of the band. Not only was I made to enter and leave the hotel through the kitchen but I had to remain alone in a little dark room all evening until I was called on to do my numbers."[85] In this interview, Holiday framed herself as being used for her talent while being treated unjustly. In her autobiography, Holiday said she could take that treatment in the South, but not in New York City, her "own home town."[86] While Holiday presented her exit from Shaw's band as an important act of personal choice against institutionalized racism, Forrest presented the same event as the result of logistical problems. Holiday used her story to show her struggle against racial injustice, while Forrest centered her own participation in this event and minimized Holiday's experience.

However, Forrest also emphasized the differences between her and Holiday's singing styles, key, and vocal techniques, in order to establish herself as a different kind of singer from Holiday—one that performed particular "white" styles of jazz. This re-writing presents a relationship of cordiality instead of hostility, and attempts to account for vocal differences

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[84] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 59.
[85] Terry Teachout, "MUSIC; Not Much in Common Except Beautiful Music," *The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2001.
[86] Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*, 79.

because of race. Forrest wrote, "But we sang in different keys and her arrangements didn't fit me. She taught me some tricks of phrasing, but her style was different from mine. We weren't really in competition, even though we were both singing with the same band…Billie and I did the ballads and we were very different."[87] Forrest diminishes the idea of competition while Holiday certainly highlights it. Though Forrest does not explicitly comment on race as a reason for their different styles and voice, she discusses her early influences shortly after. Forrest writes about how she used to imitate styles of other black artists such as Mildred Bailey, Ella Fitzgerald, Bessie Smith, and Ethel Waters, but that she was not able to compare to them and their styles because of race. She expressed, "I don't compare myself to them. They were in a different world. They were black singers, even Mildred in her way, born out of the blues and with a jazz upbringing and background. I was influenced by them at first, but I am a white singer, born out of the big bands and with a background of swing music and show tunes, and I had to find my own way with a song."[88] Forrest distances herself from these black artists, saying that her life experiences, musical experiences with big bands, and race actually forced her to have to be *more* original than these blues and jazz women and "find her own way with a song." This is in contrast to other Jewish jazz musicians who drew from African American culture and often imitated it.[89] She also asserts that she does not have a connection to the blues in the same way that many of these artists did. Forrest used her book as a space to distinguish herself from black singers, emphasizing instead a connection to a style of swing music and theatrical show tunes that signified whiteness.

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[87] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 59.
[88] Ibid., 64.
[89] For example, Ben Sidran wrote in his autobiography, "When the black jazzman plays, he is in a way staking out his own cultural territory, while the Jewish jazzman is often in the process of fleeing his own." See Ben Sidran, *A Life in the Music* (Lanham: Taylor Trade, 2003), 19, 259.

Forrest used Holiday as an authenticating force to assert her talent while presenting herself as helpless to address Holiday's situation, attributing the distance between the two singers to the times and to racial differences:

> I used to tell her I didn't want her to leave, that the thought of her leaving made me feel bad, and I hoped it wasn't because of me. She said, "Sweetheart, it's not your fault. The band's got the greatest singer in the world and it doesn't need me anymore. I don't want to be a band singer and the life I've been living is not for me. I got to go and I'm going." When she left, I felt terrible. She kissed me goodbye. I wish I could have done more for her. But I was white and she was black and the gap between us at that time was just too much for us."[90]

Especially given the fame and legacy Holiday went on to achieve in jazz, Forrest frames Holiday as endorsing her talent instead of having been replaced by Forrest. In addition, Forrest presents herself as having wanted Holiday to stay in the band, which directly contrasted Holiday's narration of their relationship. Forrest places blame on ingrained racism in America for the reason they could not perform together. This served to mask any competition between the two and allowed Forrest to pursue her career with Shaw's band. Forrest used the excuse of racial segregation, which benefitted her career while harming Holiday's. As one article put it, "Two months after [Holiday] joined the band, George Frazier wrote an article for Down Beat, the pop music magazine, in which he reported 'a despicable whispering campaign to induce Artie to fire Billie and to replace her with a girl less talented and not so [musically] demanding.'"[91] Forrest was that singer, and depicting Holiday's endorsement of her talent in Forrest's narrative could help the fact that she was the "girl less talented and not so [musically] demanding."

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[90] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 59-60.
[91] Teachout, "MUSIC; Not Much in Common Except Beautiful Music."

Forrest's narration of her relationship with Holiday reveals her efforts to promote a public image of solidarity with African American musicians and with Holiday in particular. In her autobiography, she crafted a picture in which she had a personal connection to Holiday and framed her as someone who endorsed her own talent. Ultimately, Forrest presented an image and musical identity predicated on whiteness, defining herself as a different type of singer from Holiday. Holiday's descriptions of being on tour with Forrest show a tense relationship and highlight the discord between the two, despite some of the similar obstacles they faced as women big band singers. These contrasting accounts of one another demonstrate an ongoing friction that complicates ideas about "natural" connections between Jews and African Americans, and show the ways in which women singers mobilized narratives of solidarity, racial differences, and musical authenticity and credibility in attempts to craft their legacies as singers.

Sexual Politics: Bandleader and Singer Romances

"You know how it is—you can't help the man you love."[92] –Helen Forrest

Forrest narrated the sexual and gender politics of the big band through her descriptions of her relationships with men. In her representation, bandleaders like James could sleep with whomever they wanted free of criticism in the Swing Era. As a woman, Forrest did not have this privilege. Instead, she sought to shield herself from critique and to combat stereotypes about "girl singers" by representing herself as pure and chaste, and her relationship with James as "real," romantic, and legitimate. Feminist literary scholar Julia Watson argues that heterosexual women's sexuality is not typically expressed in autobiographies "because it does not have to be named." Unlike most heterosexual white women's autobiographies, Forrest's autobiography

[92] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 23.

takes sexuality seriously, "naming the unspeakable," which allows her to come to a new subjectivity.[93] The publication was Forrest's significant act of performance and also a record, as she actively participated in crafting her legacy and narrative. Her narrative sheds light on the ways in which Forrest negotiated her position as a women jazz singer in front of a big band and asserted how romantic forces drove her to make certain choices in her life.

Bill Libby also centralized sexuality's role in Forrest's narrative through the introduction, which asserted male bandleaders' sexual prowess and described Forrest's relationships as challenging. He wrote:

> Helen had an association with three of the greatest "womanizers" of their time—[Dick] Haymes, [Artie] Shaw, and [Harry] James. James married three gorgeous showgirls, notably Grable. Shaw married eight beauties, notably movie stars Ava Gardner and Lana Turner. Haymes married six, notably the star Rita Hayworth. Helen, herself, made three marriages—and divorces—during a tempestuous personal life.[94]

By focusing on the male bandleaders' reputations as well as the number of marriages they had to white women,[95] Libby's comment points to the celebrity lifestyle of men in positions of power. Hames, Shaw, and James had reputations for the number of women they slept with and married. Though Libby's comment sheds light on this, the adjectives he used to describe the women ("three gorgeous showgirls" and "eight beauties") positioned them as trophies who exhibited ideal white womanhood. In contrast, his description of Forrest's "tempestuous personal life" presents her number of relationships as troubling and challenging. Libby's introduction pushes

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[93] Julia Watson, "Unspeakable Differences: The Politics of Gender in Lesbian and Heterosexual Women's Autobiographies" in *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 393-394.
[94] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 9.
[95] Rita Hayworth was understood as the most "exotic" of the women, as discussed earlier.

the sexual and gender politics of big bands into the spotlight by centralizing male sexual prowess, by naming white women who married famous bandleaders, and by positioning Forrest's relationships as failed. This depiction aligns with the long-held idea that men are rewarded for their sexual conquests while sexually active women are shamed for "immorality."

The strongest thread throughout Forrest's biography is her enduring love for Harry James. Forrest lines up her relationship with James right along with her musical success: "I had hit records. Number one, number one, number one. I also had Harry…for a little while. Number one in my love life. I've had three marriages and I never married Harry, but he was the love of my life. Let's face it, I still carry a torch for the so-and-so."[96] She narrated the sexual politics of the music industry through an emphasis on James and his sexual partners, her virginity, and her own sexual encounters. Through these narrations, she emphasized pleasure and desire, writing sexuality into jazz history in gendered ways. Through her autobiography, Forrest presents alternatives for the stereotype of "promiscuous girl singer" while also promoting herself as restrained and desirable.

Forrest describes Harry's sexual prowess by saying that he was "democratic" and non-discriminating in attempts to present him in a positive light and in a way that emulated some of the values of the Swing Era. She wrote, "He could have had almost any woman he wanted. And did. Beautiful, ugly, tall, short, thin, fat, Harry had all he could handle, and he handled all he could. They rolled in and out of his room at an alarming rate, some of them so homely you couldn't believe he'd bother. The boys in the band used to say Harry would go to bed with anything in a skirt even if he had to put a bag over her face."[97] While Forrest focuses on body type as well as image, she does not focus on race. She repeated this sentiment several times in

[96] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 23.
[97] Ibid.

her descriptions: "He loved the ladies. And he didn't care what they looked like. Not that he didn't get his share of beauties, because he did. But he also took on the homelies others in his position wouldn't have bothered with. Harry was very democratic. As long as the lady had the right equipment, Harry wanted to try it."[98] In referring to James as "democratic," Forrest connected James' sexuality to a patriotic American value of masculinity that emphasized fairness and equality, though importantly does not comment on race. At the same time, Forrest drew attention to James' promiscuity while also asserting his heterosexual desire for (white) women with "the right equipment." In Forrest's descriptions, democracy, a central value of the Swing Era, became aligned with James' approach to women's bodies. He thus became reflective of the era through his sexuality and through his production of swing music. As David Stowe argued, "Swing was the preeminent musical expression of the New Deal: a cultural form of 'the people,' accessible, inclusive, distinctively democratic, and thus distinctly American."[99]

James' story also served as a backdrop to the ways that Forrest narrated her own sexuality. Forrest's description of her sexual innocence stood in stark contrast to James' "democratic" sexual encounters; she even dismissed her marriage to her first husband in order to emphasize James as her "first." "I was virtually a virgin when I got together with Harry," she confided. "Oh, I was married, but still practically untouched. I'd married a drummer from Baltimore when I was with Artie Shaw's band…He stayed at home playing drums in Baltimore, while I went on the road. We never really had a marriage. We didn't see each other very often, much less sleep together much… I hadn't had any real relationship with men before Harry."[100] In a sense, she claimed a metaphorical virginity before James. Contrasting the conservative sexual

[98] Ibid.
[99] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 13.
[100] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 24.

relations of the 1930s with the promiscuity of the entertainment world, she claimed that her first husband, "lived with his father and I lived with my mother and we weren't alone very often and didn't go to bed or anything like that. This was 1937, remember, and a nice boy and a nice girl didn't go in for that sort of thing, even a drummer and a singer. And he was a nice boy."[101]

At several instances in the book, Forrest emphasized her purity through repeated assertions of virginity, pushing back against the notion that all "girl singers" slept around. She wrote of her early days touring with Artie Shaw's band: "Maybe because of my background I wasn't too keen on men or experienced with them. I was still a virgin, and while I was singing songs of love I didn't know much about it. I was still young, just twenty years old…"[102] Forrest drew parallels between virginity, naivety, and singing love songs, resisting the idea that singers must be "experienced" to sing about love. Later, she emphasized again, "I was still a virgin when I married Al Spieldock. Good old Al…He kept talking to my mother about me and she was all for marrying him. I know what she was thinking. She was thinking that it would be bad for me to be the only girl traveling in a band of fifteen or sixteen men and if I was married I would be safe."[103] Forrest commented on how her mother viewed marriage as a way to maintain respectability while on the road with an all-male ensemble. Forrest constantly reminded the audience of the purity of her body at these moments as she tried to combat accusations of sexual promiscuity in her position as a "girl singer."

While Forrest criticized the promiscuity of some girl singers, she also discussed other possibilities for singers, including chastity. Forrest included herself in this group that "stayed straight," or did not sleep around while on the road with the band. She wrote, "I was one of those

[101] Ibid., 50.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid., 72.

[who stayed straight] until I got to Harry James band and it seems to me that if you set your standards high and stuck to them the guys would accept it."[104] Forrest used herself as an example of a singer who could fend off the advances of male band members. She represented herself as superior to others because of her ability to maintain her morals and standards in contrast to promiscuous girls. Forrest's claims to exceptional "purity" helped to distinguish her as an exceptional "girl singer." Through examples such as this one, Forrest revealed some of the challenges of maintaining a respectable reputation as a singer and navigating relationships with men in a big band.

Forrest attributed men's attraction to her position as a big band singer, rather than to her appearance. "Of course, I wasn't a raving beauty. People kept telling me I wasn't too bad, but I was never too sure. Even after I had my nose bobbed. I never really liked my looks. I was flattered to be a woman that Harry wanted. A lot of guys wanted me. Only girl in the band on the bus on the road. A big singer. Maybe not too bad-looking. But I didn't care about them. I cared about Harry. As the song goes, I was just wild about Harry. He was the one I wanted."[105] Forrest's assertion of her monogamous desire for James alone distinguished her from other singers:

> There always was a lot of talk about the girl singers in the all-boy bands. A lot of it was true, too. There were singers who took on all the guys in their band at one time or another. They were all together in this thing and the girls didn't want to play favorites. Tonight, the brass section. Tomorrow night, the reeds. You know. And of course there were the girl singers who just got involved with one guy and really had a hot romance with him and maybe wound up marrying him. And the girl singers who put out for the

[104] Ibid., 70-71.
[105] Ibid., 24.

> leader. A lot of them had hot romances with their leaders and quite a few wound up marrying them.[106]

When Forrest narrated these various romantic and sexual scenarios, she revealed the diversity of relationships between girl singers and band members. Forrest's framing is significant because she separated herself from these other singers to insist on her devotion for James. Her emphasis on a monogamous marriage to James can be seen through the fact that she wrote, "I still have my engagement ring, by the way. I had it made smaller so I could move it to my little finger. I still wear it."[107] She kept a physical signifier of her relationship with James almost fifty years later.

Forrest described James' lovemaking as transcendent, placing him on a pedestal while emphasizing the importance of female desire. Forrest makes pleasure—including female pleasure—visible by describing it through the accepted framework of "love." She wrote:

> Not only was he the greatest trumpet player in the world, he was the greatest lover in the world. Not that I know. A lot of ladies are more qualified to comment on that than I am. But he was the best I ever had. By far. I learned more about making love from Harry than from any man I ever knew. I'm not talking about tricks. Different positions and things like that. That doesn't interest me. I'm speaking about love, pure love, passionate lovemaking. Harry was my teacher and he was a great teacher. Very gentle, kind, caring about your pleasure as much as his. Harry loves ladies. He not only likes to make love to them, he loves them and cares about them.[108]

In these descriptions, Forrest aligned James' exceptional lovemaking abilities with his music. She was careful to frame James not as a womanizer, but as a tender lover—a description that

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[106] Ibid., 70.
[107] Ibid., 32.
[108] Ibid., 25-26.

reflects on her. Forrest presented herself as less-experienced than his other women, emphasizing her own high standards. At the same time, she focused on the significance of female pleasure and sexuality—not just male bandleaders' sexuality.

James' band's performances often featured solo trumpet lines at the opening and in the middle of songs, which gave James a space to highlight his technical skill and invoke an emotional response from the audience by expressing sensuality in his musical interpretation. For instance, in "You Made Me Love You," the song opens with a solo trumpet melody line by James. He includes long drawn-out notes at the end of phrases along with a gentle vibrato. On other notes, he slides and swoops. These musical choices convey the helpless feeling of being a captive to love in ways that align with the song's theme: "You made me love you."[109] The strings and other horns support this feeling underneath James' trumpet. After Forrest's voice comes in with the lyrics, James responds to her lines by including improvised doodles of his muted trumpet. This technique places him in an intimate conversation with the singer. Further, in one of his responses, James includes a descending line that includes notes from the Arabic scale, giving the line a hint of an "exotic" and sensual sound.[110] At the end of the song, he solos on an ascending scale and lands on a high note, the center focus of the song. James' stylistic choices and interpretation of notes contributed to his reputation as a sensual performer, something that Forrest engaged in her autobiography.

As previously discussed, a large portion of Forrest's autobiography emphasizes Forrest's desire to appeal to the womanizing James (both past and present), and the lengths she went to appeal to him. This presentation demonstrates how beauty and ethnicity intersect with the sexual

[109] Helen Forrest with the Harry James Orchestra, "You Made Me Love You," *Parlophone*, 1941.
[110] Fiona Ngo has shown the power of tropes of empire that emerged during the jazz age. Some of these influences deemed "exotic" were continually incorporated into jazz and popular music. See Ngô, *Imperial Blues*.

politics of big bands. This is especially true because Forrest depicts her battle to keep James when he began to court Betty Grable, the famous blond "pin-up girl" and actress. As Forrest recalled, "Like most ladies, I like to be as sexy as I can be, but I've always known I'm no sexpot. I'm basically shy and not anxious to show off what I've got, which was never what a Betty Grable had. I fell for Harry before he fell for Betty and I wanted to be as much of a good-looking lady for him as I could be."[111] It is significant here that Forrest contrasts herself to Grable, "a sexpot." However, as Robert Westbrook has argued, "Betty Grable's appeal, in particular, was less as an erotic "sex goddess" than as a symbol of the kind of woman for whom American men—especially American working-class men—were fighting. She was the sort of girl a man could prize. Her image, carefully cultivated by the star-making machinery of Twentieth Century Fox, was 'straight-arrow, chintz-table-cloth.'"[112] Grable's "averageness," Westbrook argues, was crucial to her success and popularity for both men and women. In addition, Grable became more popular after marrying Harry James in 1943, and women looked up to her as "a model of female virtue" and a modest image.[113] Forrest makes a comparison between herself and Grable especially through their appearances.

In terms of pin-up popularity, Grable's whiteness was also a key to her success. Westbrook points out, "… the war in the Pacific was a race war, and Grable's obvious "whiteness" gave her an advantage over competitors such as Hayworth (nee Margarita Cansino) in the eyes of white soldiers waging a brutal struggle against a racial enemy in a setting in which, as they often complained, white women—especially women as white as Grable—were in short

[111] Ibid., 141.
[112] Robert B. Westbrook, "'I Want a Girl, Just Like the Girl that Married Harry James': American Women and the Problem of Political Obligation in World War II," *American Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (1990): 596.
[113] Ibid., 600-605.

supply."[114] While Westbrook talks about soldiers during World War II preferred "stars as white as Grable," Forrest also continued to change her appearance, "going blonde" and attempting to erase other markers of her ethnicity.

To differentiate herself from Grable and to counter the perception of her relationship with James as one of his passing fads, Forrest insists on her exceptional vocal talent. In her autobiography, one thing that Forrest makes sure the audience knows is that she had the vocal pipes that Grable did not. When talking about a film that both women appeared in called *Springtime in the Rockies*, Helen wrote, "Although Betty was the star, I had the big song in the picture. I always could sing rings around her. Ha!"[115] Forrest presents the idea that her vocal talent could outshine Grable as the star of the show, insisting on her strength while commenting on Grable's lack to present herself as exceptional.

The differences in Grable and Forrest's voice include their differing levels of musicality, their abilities to interact with the instruments, and their musical interpretation of lyrics. As primarily a model and actress, Grable often sang simple, straightforward melodies, many of which were featured as part of plot lines in movies. For example, Grable recorded a 1945 rendition of "I Can't Begin to Tell You" from *The Dolly Sisters* with James' orchestra. The song has a slow tempo, and the melody allows Grable to sing notes within a narrow range. She scoops on many of the notes, sliding from one note to another—a way that singers can approximate notes with their voices before landing on the exact note. The slow pace of the song allows Grable to draw the notes out, and the orchestra functions to support the singer and guide her through the song. Grable's voice in other songs sounds similar, and she sings notes in a limited range. Forrest, by contrast, was primarily a singer who had developed her skills through performances

[114] Ibid., 599.
[115] Forrest, *I Had the Craziest Dream*, 123-124.

on radio shows and with her family's band in younger age. These experiences resulted in Forrest's voice having a different relationship to the band, notes, and lyrics. In "I Had the Craziest Dream" from *Springtime in the Rockies*, Forrest's vocal range allows her to sing both higher and lower notes, and the melodies she sings are more complex. She also leans in to the notes dynamically, and her vocal interpretation and the sound of the band complement each other. Her sound conveys confidence and intentionality. Forrest was, in fact, a more experienced and more popular singer, a reputation that she deployed in order to assert her vocal power over Grable.

Forrest presented herself as "taking the high road" in her later encounters with James and Grable to depict herself as moral and decent while describing how the sexual politics of James' big band lingered even after she left it. A few months after leaving James' band, Forrest went to go see "some of the boys." When James wanted to have a drink with her "for old time's sake," she said, "Go on home, Harry. Go on home [to Betty]."[116] Forrest depicted herself as respecting the boundaries of marriage, even when James pursued her. Forrest's recollection of this event also drew a parallel between her and Grable: both women had been hurt by James' infidelity. At another instance, Forrest was sure to note how polite she was in her encounter with Grable: "We each said hello. She said she enjoyed my singing, and I thanked her. Then, to my surprise, she said, 'I would trade my looks to sing like you' and hurried off."[117] Here, Forrest promoted herself as modest while also framing her vocal abilities as outstanding. If Grable, one of the most popular "pin-up girls" of the 1940s, would trade her physical beauty for Forrest's singing talent, Forrest could certainly be understood as remarkable. Forrest frames voice as having more value

[116] Ibid., 31-32.
[117] Ibid., 149.

than looks to assert her presence in a larger narrative about the women with whom James' had relationships.

Forrest also narrated a personal encounter with Grable in attempts to demonstrate a kind of sisterhood and mutuality that emerged over time. This encounter also drew attention to the challenges women celebrities faced in navigating the sexual politics of big bands. Forrest wrote about an instance when she saw Grable many years later in a Beverly Hills restaurant. While she described slight embarrassment during the exchange, she also depicted the women as overcoming obstacles from the past.[118] Forrest's description acknowledged the awkward gendered recognition that they "both loved the same man."[119] When Forrest narrates this encounter, being in the same physical space made memories and feelings emerge. With time passed, Forrest depicted the women as dismantling rivalries over past relationships. Instead, the shared frustrations that surfaced served to lessen the pain of James' infidelity, deceit, and poor treatment of women.

Forrest also commented on the internal politics of big bands when bandleader-singer marriages were involved. She gave the example of Harriet Hilliard, a "girl singer" who joined Ozzie Nelson's band in 1932 and became his wife in 1935. When Nelson wanted Forrest to join his band as the second girl singer to perform the ballads, she replied, "Ozzie, I'm very flattered to be wanted, but Harriet is your wife as well as your singer and I'll bet you all the money in the world that when a good ballad came along, you'd give it to her. True?"[120] Forrest argued that male bandleaders would prioritize their wives over other singers regardless of talent. She concluded: "See! I just don't think it would be wise for a girl singer to join a band where the girl

[118] Ibid., 149-150.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid., 48-49.

singer is the leader's wife."[121] When Forrest declined a position in another band—as did other singers—because of these sexual politics, she demonstrated an awareness of these dynamics within the music industry and navigated them to sustain her career.

Conclusion

Forrest's autobiography—in accounting for her ambivalent feelings about her Jewish identity along with her complicated relationships with Billie Holiday and Harry James—reveals her varied performances of identity through the arc of her career. It also suggests the many dimensions of performance that singers used to navigate their careers, whether positioning themselves in relation to other singers based on race or ethnicity, promoting various versions of sexuality, or demonstrating the significance of gendered labor central to big band singers' careers. Her autobiography intervenes in dominant discourses about her life, music, and choices to control her public image and to promote her career. Because her position as a big band singer was both vocal and visual, Forrest was able to present justifications for her performances of whiteness. At other moments, she aligned herself with other Jewish musicians for career opportunities and shared connections based on ethnicity. Unlike Kay Starr, who negotiated her relationship to blackness/whiteness through her music, Forrest distanced herself from African American culture and music, differentiating herself through whiteness when Holiday and she performed together with Artie Shaw's band. Through her narration of her relationships, she sought to present herself as desirable and chaste to work against stereotypes of "girl singers." Forrest's strategic self-presentation reveals the pressures that she faced to adhere to the dominant beauty and vocal standards of white girl singers, to navigate the politics of big bands and

[121] Ibid.

rivalries among singers, and to position herself in relation to hierarchies of race, gender, and sexuality during the Swing Era.

Chapter 4

The Aging Body & Voice: Women Singers' Performances in Big Band Nostalgia Tours

Introduction

In this chapter, I look specifically at how the aging voices and bodies of women big band singers—the singers of 4 Girls 4 and singer Maxine Sullivan—served both to conform to and transgress standards of femininity, vocal production, and image presentation that were dominant during the 1930s and 1940s. In particular, I show how singers in older age utilized their voices and bodies to mobilize modes of nostalgia, performing gender, race, and age in ways that allowed audiences to access idealized versions of the past. The idea of the "aging voice" calls to mind both the changes in sounds produced by vocal chords, but also "voice" as it serves to articulate and reflect upon one's experiences, performances, and past—something these women do frequently in interviews and memoirs. The performances of these women, on and off stage, both invoked something new and fulfilled nostalgic longings of audience members while also politicizing the aging process and showcasing women's labor in older age.

This chapter demonstrates how aging women singers' performances of music and identity challenged acceptable expressions of womanhood, sexuality, and race. The performances of singers' bodies and voices on nostalgia tours and comeback tours "staged age" through visual and sonic signifiers that presented audiences with a way to see and hear age. For female big band singers in older age, the deepening of the voice worked against the hyper-feminine glamorous entertaining complement to the bands that they once served. Performers not only asserted their presence as singers in older age, but also actively evoked nostalgia in order to promote the significance of their music and performances. These women used music, performances,

interviews, and documentaries as platforms to promote their relevance and labor, advocating for their craft of singing as a way to re-activate specific visions of the past: for 4 Girls 4, a post-World War II picture of leisure and glamour, and for Sullivan, a 1930s egalitarian and democratic vision based in swing ideology and American identity. In doing so, the singers of 4 Girls 4 and Maxine Sullivan demonstrated the potential of working womanhood in older age to cultivate nostalgia through their performances.

The nostalgia invoked through 4 Girls 4 and Maxine Sullivan's tours gestured to specific versions of an idealized past rooted in different moments in American history. Svetlana Boym describes a nostalgic state as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed."[1] When the bulk of these nostalgia tours became popular in the 1970s and 1980s, the American public sought a version of the past that could provide comfort in the wake of uncertain times: the American war in Vietnam, high profile assassinations like those of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, social revolutions (including black liberation and women's liberation movements), the Watergate Scandal, and the upheaval of the 1960s that made some Americans feel unsure of the government as well as other citizens. People who viewed themselves as vulnerable and threatened in uncertain political moments could utilize entertainment as a measure of escape, and performances by big band singers could help to "create an imaginary past to which they long to return," as Patrick Burke points out.[2] He argues, "Although nostalgic visions draw their power and appeal from an idealized sense of the past, it is always a past 'remade in the image of the present or a desired future.'"[3]

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[1] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xiii.
[2] Patrick Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth: Jazz and Race on 52nd Street* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 204.
[3] Ibid.

This image of "the past" varied in the performances of 4 Girls 4 and Maxine Sullivan. The nostalgia invoked by tours like 4 Girls 4 created a sense of longing for a pre-civil rights, predominantly white style of band-singer jazz that appealed to an upper and middle-class white demographic. As Lewis Erenberg pointed out, big bands of the Swing Era:

> …offered a model of male group strength that avoided the entanglements of home, family, and women. Yet every swing band had its lone female participant—the girl singer, or canary—who enacted a model of male-female relations during the 1930s and 1940s…Many leaders would have been content to function without vocalists, but they needed singers of romantic songs and iconic models of femininity to appeal to a heterosexual youth culture."[4]

The careers of singers such as Helen O'Connell, Margaret Whiting, and Rosemary Clooney were sparked towards the end of this time period, and many of the singers who performed with 4 Girls 4 became popular icons through their performances as "girl singers," embodying a type of femininity that emitted glamour and emulated post-World War II leisure and consumption. This picture of nostalgia in 4 Girls 4 tours is also shown through the lack of women of color singers present on the tour, the "romantic songs" and other popular tunes, and the audience demographic.[5] Even the manager of the tour, Bill Loeb, had this picture in mind. When he put the show together, he recalled, "I thought I would put four old blonde [*sic*] broads together and make one show out of it."[6] Loeb gestures towards whiteness, older age, and sexuality when he

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[4] Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 84-85.
[5] As I will discuss, the audience demographic in performance footage from 4 Girls 4 tours generally shows older white individuals, and many of the performances that were for dinner shows or in ballrooms and theaters suggest that they were trying to appeal to middle and upper class people.
[6] Ken Crossland and Malcolm Macfarlane, *Late Life Jazz: The Life and Career of Rosemary Clooney* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 132.

describes the singers as such, and presented them in a way in which they would be marketable and consumed as entertainment, much in the spirit of postwar consumption in which the singers had initially gained fame.

Sullivan's performances of nostalgia, by contrast, invoked a 1930s swing ideology that promoted equality and progress through a specifically "American" identity. As David Stowe argues, "Swing was the preeminent musical expression of the New Deal: a cultural form of 'the people,' accessible, inclusive, distinctively democratic, and thus distinctively American…To its proponents, swing was both proof and cause of an American society growing ever more egalitarian and progressive."[7] Through her performances, Sullivan sought to promote these ideals while also gesturing towards a version of jazz history rooted in African American culture. These different nostalgia tours provided audiences access to constructions of the past through the performances of singers in older age, and the unexpected popularity of these tours shows how these women successfully engaged audience desires of the historical moment.

4 Girls 4: Invoking Nostalgia and Age on Stage

In her 1984 study on women jazz musicians, Linda Dahl says, "…by and large, big-band singing, with all its abuses, limitations and charms, is a vanished art, and the "canaries," in their high heels, low-cut gowns and gaudy makeup, are a set piece of the romanticized past."[8] Beginning in the 1970s and spanning through the early 2000s, however, a renewed interest in swing music brought women singers of big bands back into view to prove that the "canaries" from the 1930s and 40s were very much alive—and singing. Big band nostalgia groups toured around the country, and many singers embarked on "comeback" tours or saw heightened

[7] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 13.
[8] Dahl, *Stormy Weather*, 135.

visibility in media for their performances. One specific tour that placed female big band singers as the center was a musical revue called 4 Girls 4, put together by pianist-director Frank Ortega. Newspaper editor, Matt Connor, argued that 4 Girls 4 "launched a completely new genre of entertainment that thrives to this day: The Oldies Nostalgia Tour."[9]

4 Girls 4 toured from 1977 to 1989 and included a group of 4 jazz and popular singers at each iteration. It typically featured singers who had strong independent solo careers after performing with big bands in the 1940s and 1950s and then survived the shifts in the music industry, including having to change styles as popular music moved toward rock 'n roll, having to adjust from big bands to small combos or solo careers, and having to project a unique style while in competition with growing numbers of artists. Singers who performed with this group included: Rosemary Clooney, Barbara McNair, Margaret Whiting, Rose Marie, Helen O'Connell, Kay Starr, Kay Ballard, and Martha Raye, all of whom were white, with the exception of McNair (who was black, and performed with the group only once before deciding it was not a good fit), and all were in their fifties when they started. Most of these women decided to do a nostalgia tour because, while they were all performing individually, none of them were hugely successful in the 1970s.[10] Bill Loeb, who worked for the talent management company Loeb, Weems and Breecher and was manager for Rosemary Clooney at the time, had worked with some of the women on their tours over the years and decided to attempt to put the show together as an act. He thought the show could have four times the impact if the stars toured together. The group became very successful, setting house records across the country and playing before audiences at places such as the Fairmont Hotel in New Orleans, San Francisco,

[9] Matt Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," The Rosemary Clooney Palladium, 2004. http://www.rosemaryclooney.com/4girls4/page1.htm

[10] Ibid., 2. As Loeb recalled, "At the time everyone was working but nobody was setting the world on fire." (2).

and Dallas, at tents in Massachusetts, and theaters in Chicago and Scottsdale, Arizona.[11] According to performance footage of 4 Girls 4 performances, the audiences often consisted of largely older white individuals, and the main venues (hotel dinner shows and theaters) suggested relatively expensive tickets. These performances were likely marketed towards middle and upper classes. Road manager Allen Sviridoff confirmed the age demographic of the audience members when he said the singers of 4 Girls 4 "were rock stars with an older audience."[12]

These singers' performances on big band nostalgia tours provided audience members with ways to "see and hear age" in vocal performances. Through their voices, costumes, and performances, the singers in 4 Girls 4 presented an opportunity for audience members to reassess social norms (such as the glamorous and hyperfeminine trope of the "girl singer" of the 1930s and 40s), and challenge audience assumptions about what bodies and voices in older age could do. As age studies scholars Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Leni Marshall point out, "Performances of age can…transport audience members to new enactments, conceptions, embodiments, and performatives of aging and old age."[13] Scholars in age studies view the concept of age as both performance and performative.[14] Through singers' performances of age and of nostalgia on their tours, they provided audiences with ways to understand the aging process as well as ways to be critical of social norms of gender and sexuality.

The media, as well as the singers themselves, commented on the audiences and their nostalgic desires, presenting the singers' focus on affective connections. In one video, as the

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[11] John S. Wilson, "'4 Girls 4' Brings Song And Nostalgia to L.I." *The New York Times*, May 18, 1979. 8. 4 Girls 4 gave some outdoor performances in tents during the summer months in places such as Beverly and Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, an affluent community with many vacationers.
[12] Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," 1.
[13] Leni Marshall and V. Lipscomb, eds., *Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film* (New York: Springer, 2010), 1.
[14] Ibid.

camera panned an audience of older people, the narrator said, "For most of these people, it's no longer the springtime of their youth. Like many of them, Margaret Whiting is in her mid-fifties, and she's been through a lot: a long trail of hits and two divorces."[15] The narrator highlighted Whiting's age and commercial success, along with the challenges of her marital history, in attempts to show a natural connection between the older audience and Whiting. Whiting then justified her presence on nostalgia tours by saying, "I remind them of the good things, the happy. Those living and existing and having fun and enjoying. And I think this show just turns everybody on because we're enjoying it so much, they enjoy it."[16] Whiting claims that she reminds the audiences of their youth and better days, placing singers like herself as role models who can have a good time. Whiting's response gestures towards a type of carefree, leisure time of the post-World War II era in which people could consume entertainment, like her music.[17] It is also significant that Whiting rose in popularity during this time period—in the mid-1940s. This fact puts her in a position to convey nostalgia for that time period to audiences. As Michael D. Dwyer points out, "Nostalgic longing…can be used in effort to remake the present, or at least to imagine corrective alternatives to it."[18] While Whiting does not specify that things in the present are "bad" for the audience, she sees music as a tool to convey nostalgic escape—in this case, an imagined world of youth, love, and financial success.

Other singers focused on audience awareness and desires, actively combining past and present in their repertoire in order to market themselves. For example, Rose Marie, focused on

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[15] VideoTimes, "FOUR GIRLS FOUR – Profiles of Rosemary Clooney, Helen O'Connell, Margaret Whiting, Rose Marie," *YouTube*, YouTube, Feb. 2, 2014, www.youtube.come/watch?v=WouBsVb2f2g
[16] Ibid.
[17] Lynn Dumenil, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of American Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 623.
[18] Michael D. Dwyer *Back to the Fifties: Nostalgia, Hollywood Film, and Popular Music of the Seventies and Eighties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 10.

connecting to both older and younger audiences: "We all entertain very well. They understand what we're saying and singing. And it brings back memories to a certain degree, and yet we also do enough things contemporary that other people—the younger people—enjoy it."[19] Rose Marie emphasized the importance of connecting to both older and younger audiences as ways to make the group marketable. While the groups' strong suit was bringing back memories of the postwar era, Rose Marie also sought to have the group stay relevant with a younger crowd, many of whom were not alive or were quite young when the women in 4 Girls 4 were at the height of their popularity. Some of the singers decided to include more contemporary songs in their act, like tunes by The Carpenters.[20] The mix of old and new songs could then appeal to audience members of different ages. The singers as a whole were very much aware of audience desires to escape challenging times through entertainment, and sought to cater to these desires both in their performances and in how they marketed themselves. Following popular music scholars such as Tia DeNora and Simon Frith, Dwyer has pointed out that "music can act as a powerful generator of memory and marker of generational belonging."[21] By combining songs that invoke nostalgia with more contemporary popular music in their sets, these singers in 4 Girls 4 transgressed boundaries of generation. While presenting audiences with collective pictures of an imagined past through their older music, they also showed their versatility and relevance in the popular music vein. Further, by showing their repertoire choices in conjunction with consideration of audience desire, they unveiled some of the labor behind organizing the comeback tour.

The 4 Girls 4 musical revue attempted to construct a sense of nostalgia through the title of its tour, which was contradictory in its labeling and was often criticized by reviewers as well

[19] VideoTimes, "FOUR GIRLS FOUR – Profiles of Rosemary Clooney, Helen O'Connell, Margaret Whiting, Rose Marie."
[20] Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," 5.
[21] Dwyer, *Back to the Fifties*, 13.

as the singers themselves. The title of the music revue "4 Girls 4" recalls the label of "girl singer" from the 1930s and 1940s, though most of the women moved well into their sixties with the tour. However, the women's bodies and the way they "stage age" was quite in contrast to the image of the youthful girl singer. The comparison in the title also becomes part of the act, with several performers pointing to the contradiction. For example, Helen O'Connell dryly commented that the show's title uses the word "girls" loosely.[22] In another instance during the re-vamped tour titled "The New 4 Girls," Martha Raye pointed out that the singers are no longer "new."[23] The singers underscore these contradictions to invoke images from the past while helping to set up audience expectations. Most importantly, the singers aimed to connect with older audiences. While "4 Girls 4" was deemed a misnomer, it signaled the production of nostalgia, creating an image of the past through bodies in older age that transmitted the "girl singer" through signifiers of glamour such as costume, stage demeanor, and mannerisms. The title reflected present concerns of aging and the producer's attempt to market yearning for youth.

The trope of the "girl singer" found in 4 Girls 4 tours was embodied by the singers through performances of their past numbers, but was also complicated through the visual image of the body in older age. As Jeanne Scheper articulates, "Tropes, and the spectacles through which they are performed, accumulate power over time by virtue of repetition, sedimentation, and naturalization."[24] She argues that these tropes are performative, pointing to "the power of embodied practices as symbolic cultural languages, which accumulate meaning over time and

[22] Dorothy Smiljanich, "A Well-Guided Stroll Down Memory Lane," *The Tampa Tribune*, 28 January 1982. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Jeanne Scheper, *Moving Performances: Divas, Iconicity, and Remembering the Modern Stage* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 4-5.

through the force of repetition."[25] During the 1930s and 1940s, "girl singers" were known for being primarily visual accessories to bands, meant to be "eye candy" for the audience (See Chapter 1). When audiences viewed former "girl singers" on stage during 4 Girls 4 tours, they likely had expectations that their voice/sound might age just as their bodies had, and/or they might compare to singers' performances to those in earlier age. Scheper argues that even while the divas in her story performed "obligatory repertoire," they also "aimed to animate new visions of gendered and raced modern subjectivity" and "were modern innovators as well as cultural critics who reflected on their own conditions of production and consumption."[26] In a similar way, the singers in 4 Girls 4 both utilized and disrupted the dominant trope of the girl singer through performance gestures and presentations of the body and voice in older age. They also acted as cultural critics through their reflections and performance engagements in which they embraced their bodies in older age and critiqued narrow ideals of 1930s and 1940s femininity.

This emphasis on nostalgia—typically emerging through ballads and occasionally more uptempo tunes of three of the performers—was often sharply interrupted by Rose Marie's comic performances, which drew attention to the necessity for women performers to enact markers of femininity like "proper" bodily posture and glamorous appearance in order to be seen as desirable to men and to attract a partner. For example, in a 1978 4 Girls 4 television appearance of *More With Mike in Hollywood*, Rosemary Clooney, Margaret Whiting, and Helen O'Connell each sang short segments of ballads such as a slow-tempo rendition of "Fly Me to the Moon," (Whiting), "I Can't Believe That You're in Love With Me" (O'Connell), and "Have I Stayed

[25] Ibid., 5.
[26] Ibid.

Too Long at the Fair," (Clooney).[27] Rose Marie, however, performs a comic rendition of "My Blues Heaven" after a string of jokes and poems. After Clooney, O'Connell, and Whiting sing their songs, appearing (mostly) delicately and gracefully in both attire and gestures, Rose Marie's performance is an abrupt contrast. At the beginning of the song, she hoists herself onto the grand piano, struggling a bit (theatrically) and positioning herself with legs apart in a "masculine" stance. As she adjusts the microphone and puts it between her legs in her sequined black gown, she says in a deep, smoky voice, "Hi there. While you've had all this wonderful singing, now you'll get the sexy stuff. What do ya think we ought to do that's sexy for the folks tonight, Frankie? Wanna start off with a little poem?" she asks the piano player. As she adjusts the microphone, she clunkily props one of her legs on the piano, signaling to the audience the challenges of making oneself comfortable on stage in older age, while at the same time, critiquing standards of femininity that require women to appear elegant and graceful while performing. She later comments in a brassy voice "I just figured out why I can't get a guy. I look like a cello player." The audience responds with laughter, receptive to her jokes and mannerisms. Here, Rose Marie's message resonates with early twentieth-century female comedians like Trixie Friganza, who Susan Glenn has argued, had a "particular brand of self-deprecating humor—her method of self-sacrifice—spoke especially to the concerns of modern middle-class women caught up in the cult of physical attractiveness that defined the attainment of beauty as a kind of cultural duty."[28] In a self-deprecating way, Rose Marie aligns her inability to snag a partner with unfeminine bodily posture. Hunched over and legs spread apart, Rose Marie incites humor by pushing against expected social norms of femininity.

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[27]Don King, dir., *More With Mike in Hollywood*, 1978. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSvE185AAYo

[28] Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 63.

Rose Marie drew attention to the constraints of gender and sexuality during the Swing Era through performances that utilized her aging body and voice as contrast. For some female performers in 4 Girls 4, shifts in their vocal chords altered the performances of songs. For instance, deepening of the voice—something common among aging women singers—also served to work against the cutesy, hyperfeminine image of the girl singer. Compared to her early recordings, Rose Marie's voice had deepened significantly, and she was sometimes described in newspapers as "whiskey-voiced." In the 1978 television recording, Rose Marie only sings in short snippets, frequently stopping and starting. This is reflective of the vaudeville tradition/variety shows in which she used to perform. Her performance is disjointed, and she talks openly to the piano player about what to perform next, and how to share it with the audience. At various points, she cues him to replay the pitches, as she sings them back and adjusts her voice, reaching to hit the notes and making it humorous. By showing the struggles of the aging voice, she demystifies the performance process and makes it visible; her performance is humorous in its failure to produce the expected notes.[29] Rose Marie deconstructs the "girl singer" prototype through her "husky voice" and through the fragmented performance. When she sings back the pitches to the piano player in attempts to hit the right notes—while often struggling to get it right and remaining flat (or below the pitch)—she shows the challenges of the aging voice. Her voice and body fail to produce the expected performance outcome. As Jack Halberstam points out, "We can…recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to

[29] Building from Butler, Marshall and Lipscomb say, "We contend that age as well as gender can be viewed as performative, in that each of us performs the actions associated with a chronological age minute by minute, and that the repetition of these performances creates a so-called reality of age both for the subject and for those who interact with the subject" (2). See Marshall and Lipscomb, *Staging Age*.

dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique."[30] In Rose Marie's performance, the failure of her voice and her aging body offer a critique of the performance expectations of "girl singers."

The singers also "staged age," or performed older age, by embracing the changes in their voices that accompanied aging, presenting audiences with a more "mature" image of the big band singer. For example, Rosemary Clooney said in an interview, "I've lost some on top…but my lower register is better. I'm now filtering the songs I sing through a 68-year-old sensibility; I understand more, and my interpretation is better."[31] Clooney presents the idea that though she has lost some of her vocal range, she has improved through a "sensibility" that shows maturity and depth, along with an increased ability to emotionally connect with audience members. She presented the tradeoff of a physical loss—the narrowing of her vocal range—with a deep, internal understanding of her music and performances. Clooney marketed herself and her music in older age by insisting that the wisdom that accompanies aging made up for the challenges of the aging body. In doing so, she claimed her music and performances were new and improved in older age.

Critics and reviewers, often writing in concert with the nostalgic mood of the era, also promoted the singers' ability to pursue their craft in older age as well as their ability to combine old and new simultaneously. As a 1986 review in *People Weekly* by Ralph Novak points out of Margaret Whiting's music: "Like her old friend Rosemary Clooney…Whiting, 61, seems to sound better all the time. There are certainly few singers around who truly interpret popular songs as well, searching out the turns of musical and verbal phrase that highlight an emotion

[30] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.
[31] Nat Hentoff, "A Dame Who Sang a Good Song," *The Wall Street Journal*, Jul. 2, 2002. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

here, an impression there."[32] Novak centralizes Whiting's (and Clooney's) skill of increasing the depth of popular songs in order to connect with audiences through affect—something that is made possible through her older age. Novak also points out that Whiting can masterfully combine past and present: "Sometimes there's a new approach to an old tune, sometimes an old approach to a new song."[33] This ability to invoke past and present is also a key element of nostalgia that is made possible through Whiting's merging of songs and styles. In reviewing *I've Heard That Song Before*, Novak describes Whiting's new performance techniques during a rendition of an old song: "Whiting slows down the pace and almost turns the song into something totally different that's affecting."[34] Novak asserts Whiting's artistic ability shown through changing the pace and style of an old tune. The review promotes a narrative of improving with age while also valuing the depth that is added to performances in older age.

The popularity of these tours demonstrates that the audiences found fulfillment through the performances of these singers on nostalgia tours. By 1980, *4 Girls 4* was making $60,000 per week.[35] A 1978 review in *Variety* said, "'4 Girls 4,' unpredictably, yielded the biggest gross of '78 in the Venetian Room [in San Francisco], gallons of favorable ink and, artistically, a hybrid act with estimable quality, not to mention money's worth length. This quartet set ran an hour and 50 minutes and left the sold-out dinner show crowd wanting more..."[36] The sold-out dinner shows often catered to upper-class audiences, as opposed to traditional club venues or concert venues, displaying the kind of audience who sought nostalgia through the performances of 4 Girls 4. Similar flattering reviews circulated throughout the country while 4 Girls 4 toured. As

[32] Ralph Novak, "The lady's in love with you," *People Weekly*, Mar. 2, 1986. 22.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid., 23.
[35] Crossland, *Late Life Jazz,* 135.
[36] Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," 1.

former road manager Allen Svirdoff put it, "The theaters that they played were all 2,500 or 3,000 seats and they were packing it for five to eight shows a week."[37]

In older age, the singers found themselves in a position to promote both their labor and their significance as performers on nostalgia tours. The singers in 4 Girls 4 attempted to appeal specifically to women by framing themselves as working women in middle age and as "survivors" who have endured hardships of both life and show business. In doing so, they advocated for the significance of their labor in older age and presented themselves as role models for audience members in ways that were directed to the white middle class. In one interview, Rosemary Clooney said,

> An awful lot of people identify with the fact that we have been working, for a long time really. At this time in women's lives, very often, their children have gone away, and it can be a very lonely time for a woman because usually your husband is still involved with his work for another fifteen years perhaps. And to see women starting something—if you forgive me for sounding a little pretentious anyway, that it might be just a little bit inspirational.[38]

In presenting the idea that women's middle age is a time when they might feel lonely with grown children out of the house and a husband still at work, Clooney identified a largely white, middle class problem and audience. Clooney also portrayed the singers in 4 Girls 4 as going against the grain by working, propping them up as groundbreaking and promoting working womanhood. Comments like these showed the singers' perceptions of their audience. Margaret Whiting, too,

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[37] Ibid.
[38] VideoTimes. "FOUR GIRLS FOUR – Profiles of Rosemary Clooney, Helen O'Connell, Margaret Whiting, Rose Marie."

said, "We can prove that there's no such thing as a middle age crisis, at least for the four of us."[39] Further, Helen O'Connell added, "Women looking at us going through things we might have gone through or did go through would call us survivors. It's not a career surviving, it's us surviving."[40] O'Connell narrated the singers' lives and careers as important, validated experiences through such hardships as divorces and career troubles. By doing so, they also evoked a sense of nostalgia for simpler times before the hardships, but simultaneously advocated for their strength and endurance in older age. Clooney struggled with drug addiction and mental health issues prior to 4 Girls 4, and O'Connell had difficulties with drinking.[41] With the exception of Rose Marie, each woman had been through a number of marriages and divorces: four for Whiting, three for Clooney, and four for O'Connell. They narrated their survival in show business as having endured the pressures of stardom as well as the home-life challenges of working womanhood. With the 1980 seeing the highest divorce rates in US history, the singers' struggles in marriage were not just their own.

Getting "Real" On the Road and Performing "Together": The Challenges of Community

The women in 4 Girls 4 "staged age" through how they narrated their relationships with one another and through how they understood their audiences. This was also shown through how they grappled with aging and how they dealt with the labor of touring. While publicly the women in 4 Girls 4 projected an image of unity and community on stage, the picture behind-the-scenes was much more complicated. These complex dynamics were revealed in comments recorded by the singers and their managers decades after the tour, remarks made in later-published

[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] See Crossland, *Late Life Jazz*, and Conner, "The Story of 4 Girls 4."

autobiographies, and documentary film, such as a 1980 CBS mini-documentary by Steve Edwards that followed the women on tour. Through these different mediums, singers performed age and gave an intimate picture of the challenges and labor of music groups.

A rare 1980 CBS "On the Town" mini-documentary presented singers with another opportunity to show the challenges and triumphs of performing as a woman singer in older age, and importantly, of performing with other individuals on tour. The mini-documentary was shown only a few times on Los Angeles local news and has surfaced little since. This documentary, in which television host Steve Edwards followed 4 Girls 4 on tour, reveals many of the group dynamics and politics of the tour. One must keep in mind that documentaries, too, are performances, and that this documentary was intentionally ordered and assembled to convey a message about the work, lives, and music of 4 Girls 4.[42] Further, these women and their hosts were acutely aware of being on camera. Still, the documentary provides a behind-the-scenes representation of what life was like for aging performers on the road, as Edwards describes, narrates, and interviews the performers before, during, and after their performances on tour. The singers used multiple platforms—including their interviews and performances in the documentary—to negotiate their gendered and aging identities in public.

In the documentary, the singers constantly allude to their older age to show self-awareness, but also to pitch themselves as experienced and wise—something that was likely frequently undermined when the women were performing in earlier age. When Edwards first meets the performers, Whiting tells him, "I'll take my glasses off one minute and show you the

[42] Elizabeth Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 61. Cowie argues, "Documentary film not only reproduces the actions recorded by the camera but also, in its selection and ordering, produces a statement or discourse that constitutes those actions as knowable" (61). In producing the story of 4 Girls 4 on tour, the documentary presents their labor in older age to convey the singers' work to audiences.

truth."[43] The act of taking off her glasses functions as a signifier of aging. Whiting is pointing both to the fact that indeed—it is her, *the* Margaret Whiting, but she also alludes to the "truth" that includes a visual presentation of herself in older age. She commands that both Edwards and the audience see her as she is in her older age. At another instance, Whiting says, "We have done this show for a long time. We know what we're doing."[44] Whiting also draws upon age and experience to show the singers' skill in show business.

In later interviews, people who toured with the singers on the road commented on how the women spoke of their bodies in older age in vulgar and crass ways. The singers made the aging process very apparent to those who toured with the group, which included young actor George Clooney, Rosemary's nephew. George Clooney used to drive the members of 4 Girls 4 around to their performances, and his status as Rosemary's nephew and as a famous actor give his comments a great deal of credibility in literature about 4 Girls 4. He told the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "There was nothing sweet and subtle about driving those broads around. In the backseat, Martha Raye would shout, 'Georgie, pull the car over, I have to take a leak.' Then she'd hang a leg out the window and do her stuff while I kept looking forward. Meanwhile, my Aunt Rosemary would say, 'Honey, don't turn around. You'll learn too much about the aging process.'"[45] George Clooney comments on the realities of the women's bodies of older age while being on the road. The women would joke around with the experiences, though, publicly presenting their bodies in older age as humorous realities to younger people. In another example, Rosemary Clooney told *Harper's Bazaar* in 1998 that George "proved his worth by successfully

[43] Steve Edwards, dir., "On the Town." CBS. 1980.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Crossland, *Late Life Jazz*, 168.

locating Martha Raye's missing teeth."[46] Not only did those who toured with the group regularly learn of the realities of aging women's bodies, but these realities tended to be elided in many popular talent industries that sought to promote women as youthful, glamorous, and proper. While the documentary did not include such crass descriptions, many sources and interviews depicted these events. When they are included in book such as Clooney's biography and Connor's story about 4 Girls 4, they serve to demystify the glamour of show business that was presumed for girl singers. These women flaunted public working womanhood long after age thirty.

The women also performed their older age by stepping in to act in a maternal role when working with younger men, drawing attention to age in a cheeky way. These light-hearted exchanges often added humor to their interactions while also conveying their experience as performers. In the mini-documentary, Rose Marie and Clooney greet Edwards expressively. They both refer to him as "little Stevie Edwards," while chuckling and telling him he "looks adorable."[47] Clooney teasingly pats him on the head. The two singers express an older, maternal interaction with the television host while poking fun at him at the same time. Edwards awkwardly replies, "thank you, so do you."[48] Rose Marie and Clooney chuckle to themselves before saying, "Well…we're no better than then…" pointing to their older age.[49] A tension between their past selves and their present bodies continually surfaces in their comments. At the same time, they patronize the younger man in a way that is sassy. In doing so, they established themselves as "having been around" in show business. At another point, the film then shows Clooney performing "Tenderly" during a sound check. When finished, she says, "Is that a wrap

[46] Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," 11.
[47] Edwards, "On the Town."
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.

folks? Grandmother's going back to her knitting now."[50] Most of the musicians in the band were younger than her, and she expressed slight impatience at the rehearsal. When Clooney referred to herself as "grandmother," she framed herself as "older and wiser." She again points to her age, making it public and using it as a way to accelerate the length of the sound check. The singers consistently mark comparisons between past and present, making their experience in show business visible by asserting their age.

Singers also enacted age through depictions of the labor of touring; the documentary film reveals the somewhat intimate process of working "on the road" in older age while placing this process in contrast to the singers' public performances. As Cowie points out, "Film can reproduce images of laboring, but 'work' is an economic and social concept and hence must be signified as such to distinguish it from human activity that is held to be nonwork."[51] Thus the documentary frames 4 Girls 4's tours as work through its narration, music, and images. It shows the performers and crew packing up the car and then driving with Willie Nelson's "On the Road Again" playing in the background. Edwards' narration then kicks in: "They've been doing this on and off for three years. Their first stop today is Sun City, Arizona, an hour away from Phoenix, where they'll be appearing in a theater only three days old before a crowd of over 4,000."[52] It then shows the group unpacking the car. One of the men traveling with them says to Edwards, "Can you hold Rose Marie's bag?"[53] Edwards grabs the bag but is taken aback by the weight of the bag, muttering "Oh geez…Rose Marie, is this your bag? What do you have rocks in here?"[54] She jokes back, "That's just my eyelashes."[55] This draws attention to the amount of

[50] Ibid.
[51] Cowie, *Recording Reality, Desiring the Real*, 46.
[52] Edwards, "On the Town."
[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.

stuff these women brought with them to perform, revealing the effort behind the glamour. When they enter the theater, the singers are divided into two separate dressing rooms—two each. Edwards looks at the long row of glamorous gowns hung up on the wall: "is this just for uh…"[56] Clooney chimes in, "It's just for Rose Marie, if you please."[57] Clooney alludes to the fact that the performers have many costumes and gowns to wear, showing the great lengths to which the performers go to appear presentable on stage. While the women often appear in glamorous attire on stage, the behind-the-scenes shows the private and intimate processes through which they invent themselves for their performances.

In the documentary, Rose Marie emphasized how well the four singers got along, but also focused on points of contention that arose from the individualism of their early careers. On the airplane, Edwards asks, "Do you get sick of each other?" to Rose Marie who responds, "We have our ups and downs, we have our little arguments here and there, somebody not doing something on stage, somebody doing something on stage that they shouldn't be doing, and we'll have a meeting and I'll say, 'You shouldn't be doing that or you should be doing this," and then somebody will say, "You're talking bad English and you shouldn't be saying that' and those kind of things but we have meetings to sort of settle it out."[58] Rose Marie focuses on how the singers in the group collectively solved problems. However, when Rose Marie published her autobiography in 2014, she said, "Yeah, we had a lot of good times and some pretty rough times, and I was slowly having a nervous breakdown because of all the bickering going on with the show…It was mostly little things that just got on my nerves. I was always trying to straighten

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

them out so that we could do the shows. I didn't realize what it was doing to my stomach."[59] She points to the physical damage that occurred to her body because of the stress she was placed under as she tried to solve the group's problems. In voicing the challenges of working in the group, she points to the required labor and inevitable hardships of diva group dynamics.

The singers' costumes provided the audience with another way to "see age," which included conflicting accounts of what a "girl singer" should wear on stage. Typically, three of the four singers (Clooney, Whiting, and Rose Marie) would wear floor-length gowns with sequins or glitter. Helen O'Connell, however, would appear onstage usually in unadorned, floor-length conservative dresses. Some of the other performers complained, and Rose Marie reflected, "Helen was a drag. She really was. Most of us were beaded and in sequins, and Helen would appear in a plain dress."[60] Rose Marie voiced the lack of unity among the singers at times, in this case, especially when it came to attire. O'Connell's casual dress, though, served again to diversify and work against the notion of the glamorous "girl singer." The colors of her dresses were typically toned-down, aligning with her cool, laidback vocal style and performances. Her appearance provided the audience with another possibility for seeing age through costume: perhaps a more "mature" look for a maturing performer. At the same time, O'Connell's choice of dress caused conflict with the other singers and with managers and club owners. As one recalled, "…John Kenley, of the Kenley Theater Circuit, in Ohio, went over to her and said, 'You look like you're wearing pajamas next to the other girls.' She said she was wearing a designer dress, and he said, 'I don't care. You look like you're wearing pajamas. They're all sequined and beaded and theatrical and you look like you just came out of the bathroom.'"[61] O'Connell

[59] Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," 9.
[60] Ibid., 5.
[61] Ibid.

eventually caved to the pressure to conform and unify with the others in terms of attire, changing to align with the styles of the other singers. Through the attire choices of the singers, eventually the group as a whole became unified in representing glamour in older age on stage.

Though the documentary is supposed to give a "behind-the-scenes" look at 4 Girls 4, the singers stilled performed for the camera, harnessing their reactions and placing blame on external events when they were not received well by audience members. For example, after Whiting finishes her segment of a performance, she tells Edwards, "Nothing affects me but the immediacy with the audience of which there was none for me. And it's usually comes as a shock because I'm so used to coming out there and really getting an audience and uh…they're older people and more reserved, and it just...you know…I don't think the acoustics are good. I didn't like the sound of it myself so that kind of threw me for a minute."[62] Whiting appears frazzled, blaming both the lack of audience response and the acoustics of the venue for why her performance was not ideal. When one of the other singers asks how the monitors are (the mechanism through which singers can hear themselves on stage), Whiting replies, "I hated the whole thing…I didn't like the sound of the mic, myself. I shouldn't say this to you before you go out, but I wasn't too happy with the sound at all…I usually come in and tell the girls that everything was beautiful."[63] Here, Whiting conveys her performance as atypical, and promotes the idea that her successful performances set the stage for the singers who follow her.

Sometimes the singers were received differently by the audiences, which could cause friction and tension in the group and showed how these women could be in competition with one another even while performing in a group. O'Connell comes back from her performance

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid.

complaining, "I couldn't hear myself on stage…at all."[64] When Edwards asks how the audience was, O'Connell said, "I thought they were receptive, very responsive. I wish I could have heard myself better 'cause then I sing better." In contrast to Whiting's description of the audience, O'Connell presents them as actively engaged. When Edwards asks Rose Marie if she had a problem hearing herself, she replies, "A little bit, but I don't care. I plow through it. I don't care. I could see them smiling and I could see them enjoying it and laughing, and there's a depth that you can hear out there without the monitors. You hear it back there."[65] Rose Marie alludes to monitors as filtering the sound and the authenticity of the audiences' reactions. In contrast to Whiting, who is more focused on hearing herself, Rose Marie focuses more on the audience and their reaction to her show. Part of her backstage performance for the documentary camera is that she cares little about some of the things the other singers take seriously, like being able to hear oneself while performing. Rose Marie says, "Well, they were a good audience. I loved them. I thought they were great."[66] Each of the performers had various attitudes towards the audience, depending on how they perceived that they were received. When the singers narrated their perceptions of audience members, the descriptions are inherently tied to perceptions of their own performances as well as hints of competition that surfaced within the group. The various women's perceptions of how they were received by the audience signaled that although 4 Girls 4 was promoted as a group of "girls," they really performed individual acts, were received differently, and sometimes were in competition with one another based on audience reception.

In the documentary, the singers' interviews during the show express critical responses to their own performances and to audience members' reactions while also showing the singers'

[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Ibid.

awareness of the rolling camera backstage. The singers' analyses of their performances, the venue, and the audience frame them as knowledgeable professionals with much experience in their older age. However, the camera also captures a moment of unified excitement and validation when the singers realize they have received a standing ovation from the older crowd. With surprise, Rose Marie says, "They're standing up!" and Whiting says, "Go back!"[67] The women file back on stage for an encore bow as the band continues to play the finale theme in the background. Back in the dressing rooms, Rose Marie exclaims, "We did it!" and the singers chatter about the audience: "They're actually standing up!"[68] After this audience reaction, the women agree that they were pleased with the show. Clooney says, "I thought the people were wonderful…sweet little people got up. That's sweet."[69] The women speak very highly of the audience at the end of the show, despite the frustrations with the initial low energy of the crowd. This shows a shift once the women receive the desired outcome of a standing ovation. It is significant that Clooney and the others point to the older age of the audience members as well, who are, according to Clooney's description, exerting themselves to express their enjoyment and gratitude by standing for an encore. How the audience received the show was important for a harmonious internal group dynamic, but the film also captures unexpected moments and frames them within the documentary to showcase how the women come together, unified, after a successful performance by audience standards. In this way, the documentary presents them as a cohesive group.

Performing together was no easy feat, but it created a collective community of "age on stage," with the singers introducing one another and joking about each other's quirks and

[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid.

tendencies. In a 1982 *Tampa Tribune* article, Dorothy Smiljanich said, "The only time the four women appear on stage together is to do "Together" as their final and all-too-brief number."[70] This finale performance displayed an attempt for these solo singers with decade-long careers to try to sing and work together despite the individualism typically so prevalent in stardom. The performances of the final number were far from perfect, sometimes pitchy and not always smooth in execution, as can be seen in video recordings of the finale.[71] However, the song from the musical *Gypsy* and the intro/coda later crafted for the group became an important display of unity and became part of the group's charm. In their custom closing number, each woman sang a verse independently before introducing the next, while poking fun at the mannerisms of the others through half-sung/half-spoken verses. For example: Rose Marie begins: "See Margaret is sweet, but she'd rather shop than eat./She starts at ten and cleans out every store."[72] The singers voice each other's flaws, while being theatrical and comical. The finale allowed them to largely perform individually their strength while singing about one another. The theme song for 4 Girls 4 asserts that the collective is better than one, two, or three "girls" because "best of all are four girls four." Rose Marie adds, "Here we are, ladies and gentlemen, the Lennon Sisters of the Stone Age."[73] To emphasize the groups' familial ties—along with their older age—she comically refers to the popular 1950s and 1960s American vocal group (the Lennon Sisters) which was comprised of six siblings. Her reference to "the Stone Age" signals that the group emerged "way back then," again invoking the past and present—a contemporary reference for the audience is cued while also performing as a remake of the past.

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[70] Smiljanich, "A Well-Guided Stroll Down Memory Lane."
[71] Don King, dir., *More With Mike in Hollywood*.
[72] Rosemary Clooney, Rose Marie, Helen O'Connell, and Margaret Whiting, "4 Girls 4 & Together," MyIdealMusic Video. 7:12, July 20, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1Re1xtqaBI
[73] Ibid.

Whiting blamed individualism for the conflicts, which was predicated on a history of each being a diva in her own right during earlier careers. Part of the tension between individualism and collective performance emerged from having these women be lumped together for the purposes of nostalgia and comfort. The 4 Girls 4 tour combined individual performers into a musical review that gave tidbits and glimpses into the post World War II era. The tour was initially constructed as a way for the women to make money—none was doing very well on their own. By having four performers in older age combined together, big band nostalgia could be packaged and sold as four divas for the price of one. It was almost as if the women—no longer in their youth—became less valuable independently. However, the group also led to conflict. Whiting said, "We did have problems. You can't get four girls who are big stars and were doing a great act and not have problems."[74] Whiting also points to success as being a cause for conflict, one that was shown by O'Connell wanting to own part of the group instead of dividing the group equally. However, even in interviews, the singers would always present themselves as overcoming the conflicts that arose based on individual styles. Whiting continued, "But we got along and the great thing was our senses of humor. Rosie and I became very close on that tour. She said I was kind of like her sister Betty. We'd hang around a lot together."[75] Whiting stresses the familial-type relationships developed on the tour and humor as a tool to overcome stressful times and the individualism that often sparked the conflicts.

Singers' performances and performances of age extended beyond the stage, and they enacted presentations of themselves through interviews that appeared in newspapers. In an interview with John S. Wilson of the *New York Times* in 1980, Helen O'Connell articulated the idea that public womanhood in the 1950s was over for women by age thirty, and appearing on

[74] Connor, "The Story of 4 Girls 4," 9.
[75] Ibid.

stage after that made her feel insecure about her appearance. She discussed returning to singing after her divorce: "I felt old," continued Miss O'Connell who at that time was 30. "I felt that nobody would want to hear me or see me. I was thin, but I felt fat. I felt ugly. And I'm still not over it."[76] In this interview, O'Connell points to her divorce as the catalyst for getting her back into singing, as she had to provide for her children, but she also comments clearly on the effect the divorce and her age had on her self-confidence. The idea that women should not work when married or after the age of thirty was standard in the 1950s, and many girl singers retired once they found a husband. O'Connell returning to the microphone could be seen as an act of shame, especially if she felt she could not embody the expected beauty ideals. O'Connell performs a notion of vulnerability that brings effects of her divorce into the public and shows the impact of that event on her body image. When she says, "I'm still not over it," she points to the enduring power of what "girl singers" were supposed to look like due to the beauty ideals of the 1940s and 1950s—a scar remained with her.

The singers of 4 Girls 4 endured struggles of aging and the labor of touring together, sometimes creating a collective community while at other times feeling the friction of performing in a group. The singers of 4 Girls 4, so heavily steeped in individualist diva culture, struggled to come together behind-the-scenes. Through the performances on stage, in interviews and documentaries, and through descriptions in the media, these many performances staged age, making audiences aware of issues of labor and societal expectations. These performances spoke to present concerns of upper and middle class audiences, especially women, but were often limited in the kinds of solidarity that they could produce. The singers and their performances

[76] John S. Wilson, "And Now, Helen O'Connell, the Singer" *The New York Times*, Nov. 14, 1980.

were transgressive in the ways that they brought issues of women's aging and work into the public view.

Maxine Sullivan: Performing Presence and Nostalgia

Maxine Sullivan had been performing for nearly fifty years when she embarked on a 1985 Japan tour with Scott Hamilton's band. Japan—in the midst of an economic boom—had seen an increasing flow in American jazz musicians since the 1960s, and jazz in Japan had become widespread since the wartime era.[77] Despite nearing her mid-70s and challenges brought on by her recent lapses in health, Maxine Sullivan appears smiling on stage in a performance. She opens saying, "I know nobody out there's old enough to remember…" before beginning on the introduction to her signature song "Loch Lomond." Sullivan wears a blue suit with a scarf tied around her neck and subtle pearl earrings. Her hair appears in a soft gray mound on her head. As the low humming chords of the Scottish folk tune kick in, she does not move her body much, but snaps along gently to the song's beat. Her calm and collected demeanor is, in many ways, consistent with her performances throughout her career—asserting the presence of a black female singer in what some would deem unlikely venues, singing what some would deem unlikely tunes.

Sullivan's Japan performance is reminiscent of a musical style from her early career in the 1930s, when it was a popular music trend to "swing the classics." Jazz musicians began to take folk songs and European "classics" and play them in a jazz style. As Patrick Burke argued,

[77] See Bill Kirchner, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) and Taylor E. Atkins, *Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

> By demonstrating their mastery of music in the European canon, these musicians asserted their own sophistication as serious artists and demonstrated that African American performers need not be bound to a restrictive standard of racial authenticity. Ironically, however, this stance sometimes served to accentuate racial difference in the minds of their audiences by juxtaposing the band's black identities against what appeared to be "white" musical material.[78]

Indeed, "swinging the classics" was an important part of Sullivan's repertoire. Through nostalgia tours, Sullivan was transgressive through her performances, not only making herself legible in the jazz scene by performing "white" folk songs in swing style, but that her presence in nostalgia tours or "comeback tours" also served as a reminder that she was singing these songs in the pre-civil rights era and continued to sing them through the 1980s; Sullivan is both visible and enduring as a black female performer in the face of ongoing racial and gender discrimination. Through her performances in later age, Sullivan called on histories of racism and segregation while advocating for jazz as a particularly "American" genre of music and invoking nostalgia. The nostalgia invoked by Sullivan's performances gestures to a particular kind of 1930s swing ideology; as David Stowe points out of 1930s American society, swing had a "much-noted quality of enabling the individual voice to contribute to the collective whole."[79] Sullivan emulated this notion of individual voice contributing to a collective whole through her music, performances, and insistence on a particularly "American" jazz history and tradition. As she brought up the importance of national identity in jazz music, she also subtly alluded to histories of race in America in which African American musicians drew from experiences rooted in slavery to create blues and jazz music. This type of nostalgia is in contrast to the individualism

[78] Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth*, 90.
[79] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 11.

promoted by 4 Girls 4 because it is more egalitarian, expressively patriotic, and inclusive of people of color in a specifically "American" identity.

It is also significant that Sullivan's performance described at the beginning of the section takes place in Japan. When Sullivan performs this version of nostalgia in Japan and projects a specifically "American" identity that centralizes the role of African Americans in jazz's history, she asserts this history in a music scene concerned with questions of authenticity in jazz. Interest in jazz continued to grow in Japan after the wartime era, and E. Taylor Atkins has argued that Japanese musicians had an "authenticity complex" in which they struggled to define their identity in relation to the US in the realm of jazz.[80] Sullivan, however, collaborated with Japanese; she sang for albums that had Japanese producers and directors like Hitoshi Otaki and Takao Ishizuka. Sullivan's performance in Japan was not drastically different from other shows on her comeback tour, but she did frame her songs and American music history in ways that gestured towards inclusivity while still frequently referencing the important African American musicians who pioneered much jazz music.

Maxine Sullivan was a central figure in 1930s jazz. In order to understand the significance of her comeback tours, one must consider her symbolic presence as a black female jazz singer of the 1930s who performed with white big bands and recorded "traditional" folk songs. In an interview, Sullivan said, "I was really into the swing versions of the classics. That really identified me."[81] In her later years, Sullivan claimed a significant connection to these songs. One of her first big hits was "Loch Lomond," a Scottish folk song that she recorded with Claude Thornhill's all-white band on Vocalion in 1937. Sullivan recalled of Claude Thornhill: "…he didn't know what to do with me. You know, there were a lot of pop singers around, and he

[80] See Atkins, *Blue Nippon*.
[81] Maxine Sullivan, *Love To Be In Love*, directed by Greta Schiller. *USA/UK/France* (1991).

got this idea to swing a Scotch ballad."[82] Thornhill's use of Sullivan on vocals for "classics" was a marketing tool.[83] He asked Sullivan to perform songs this way in order to separate her from the many other "girl singers" of the time period. In addition, Lewis Erenberg has argued that swinging folk tunes or the "classics" "challenged the authority of the past and provided a picture of a future to open to new experience.[84] Thus Sullivan was also an instrument to push back against both music standards and ideas of musical/racial authenticity of the 1930s.

Sullivan's performances of femininity were a significant reason for her being deemed as acceptable to audiences in the late 1930s, as well as the radio's ability to mask her racial identity. As Patrick Burke has argued, Sullivan's early performances of "folk" tunes in 1937 and 1938 served as an important variation from the dominant "extroverted comedy and flashy improvisation" typically performed by African Americans at places like the Onyx Club.[85] She was received well by both black and white general audiences as well as critics.[86] He also points out, "It is possible that Sullivan's performances, although they challenged racial and stylistic boundaries, were nonetheless initially well regarded because they were seen as appropriately feminine."[87] In addition to Sullivan being heard first on the radio—something that could mask race—Burke argues that "it was precisely the contrast between Sullivan's black identity and her Scottish repertoire that fascinated her audience and that the controversy around her was in fact a valuable marketing tool rather than a liability."[88] While she became increasingly famous,

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[82] Ibid.
[83] See Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth*.
[84] Erenberg, *Swingin' the Dream*, 41. In cultivating nostalgia by singing the "classics" later in life, Sullivan again invokes a similar challenge to authority.
[85] Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth*, 96.
[86] Ibid., 97.
[87] Ibid., 98.
[88] Ibid., 99.

Sullivan had to navigate a complicated space as she received challenges to her music and authenticity as a performer.

Shortly after her initial success, there was much pushback from white people about how she was singing—swinging—folk songs. Her performances both in person and on the radio generated contentious debates over musical territory. For example, a *LIFE Magazine* read: "Negro Maxine Sullivan swings an old Scottish ballad with Tommy Dorsey's band, but is cut off at Station WJR in Detroit as 'blasphemous.'"[89] The press frequently reported on the backlash, which also drew attention to Sullivan and her music. As Sullivan recalled about "Loch Lomond" and its airing: "It put me on the map. There was a show on radio, CBS, called Saturday Night Swing Session. And I introduced 'Loch Lomond' on that show, and Leo Fitzpatrick, who was the station manager on CBS Detroit Michigan turned it off. He said it was sacrilegious to swing 'Loch Lomond' and some of the other traditional things."[90] Other newspapers like *Detroit Free Press* wrote similar articles, with headlines that read "*Radio Chief and Rotary Club Definitely Cold to Hot Swing: Luncheon Group Seems to Agree with Ban on Jazzing Old Favorites*."[91] Various organizations, mostly white (and sometimes nativist) attempted to ban these tunes, drawing upon sometimes religious, and frequently ethnic-based "traditions" as reasoning. The media drew a great deal of attention to these controversies, sometimes adding fuel to the fire. This pushback demonstrated the heightened racial tensions over musical "territory" that was claimed by groups of people, often white immigrants, as well as individuals.

Sullivan also received backlash about her style and originality from white Scottish-born singer and actress Ella Logan, who claimed she was the first to swing traditional folk tunes,

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[89] *LIFE Magazine*, Mar. 21, 1938. 20.
[90] Sullivan, *Love To Be In Love*.
[91] Ibid.

showing tensions over racial musical territory. An April 1938 *Down Beat* article titled "Maxine Copied Me!" read: "Furious because the record companies waxed Colored Maxine Sullivan's swing-swinging of old Stock songs first, Ella Logan declared she was first to swing the old numbers, 'because she didn't want to learn the new songs' and that Maxine copied her."[92] Logan, who drew on Scottish traditional music, presented herself as resistant to learning popular songs, therefore trying to assert her authenticity and originality. In contrast, Logan attempted to present Maxine as inauthentic and as an imitator. When she received press for this statement, it fueled debates over racial and musical territory. Sullivan also recalled a group of Scotsmen protesting at the Onyx because she was to sing "Loch Lomond."[93] These kinds of incidents in the 1930s and 1940s demonstrated some of the resistance she received for performing her music.

Stylistically, Sullivan and Logan's renditions of "Loch Lomond" were drastically different; Logan's version highlights the Scottish heritage of the song through her accent and lyric interpretation while Sullivan's version centers the swing element of the song to stake a claim to American jazz music. Logan's 1946 version that she recorded with the Frank DeVol Orchestra opens slowly with wind instruments playing an introduction to the melody. Logan sings with a pronounced Scottish accent, rolling "r" sounds on words like "bright," "true," and "road."[94] The tempo of "Loch Lomond" remains slow for the first two verses, and it is not until almost two minutes into the song that the orchestra's horns kick in to pick up the pace of the song.[95] Logan begins to swing the song after repeating "You'll take the high road" three times, singing the lyrics slightly behind the beat. She maintains and emphasizes her Scottish accent

[92] "Maxine Copied Me!" *Down Beat*, April 1938. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[93] Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth*, 99.
[94] Ella Logan with the Frank DeVol Orchestra. "Loch Lomond." *Majestic*. 1946.
[95] Ibid.

after modulating into the next section of the song.[96] Logan's voice possesses a type of rigidity that gives the song an awkward and somewhat forced feeling of swing. From this version, the audience can hear the heavy Scottish influence of the song in a way that resonates with its Scottish origin as opposed to jazz. In Sullivan's version of "Loch Lomond," she swings the whole song by singing gently in a way that allows her to land slightly after the beat. Through her lyric and musical interpretation, she blends jazz elements with the Scottish-signifying melody and sounds of the notes, creating music that transgresses national boundaries. On lines such as "By the step, steep side of Ben Lomond," and "And the sun coming out in the gloaming,"[97] Sullivan changes the melody of some lines in an improvisatory way so the lines differ from earlier verses. Instruments in Thornhill's orchestra solo throughout the middle section, signaling a more integrated singer-instrumentalist dynamic reflective of jazz music. Sullivan's version also has a bit of call-and-response between Sullivan and a member of the band, who sings "You take the low road/We'll take the high road."[98] This shows a community dynamic with the band that is often found in blues and jazz music. Sullivan's cool and relaxed performance presents audiences with an Americanized version of "Loch Lomond" through Sullivan's jazz interpretations.

When Sullivan sang "Loch Lomond" on her nostalgia tours years later, she re-told an important story about racial tensions in the United States, something that newspapers picked up on. A 1971 article by Lewis K. McMillan Jr. said, "If recording Loch Lomond for popular listening seemed out of the ordinary, then even more earth-shaking was that fact that Miss Sullivan, a Negro, was backed by an all-white orchestra (AND in the 1930's!) What's more, all this was just about typical of this diminutive female's entire life: 'doin' what don't come

[96] Ibid.
[97] Maxine Sullivan with the Claude Thornhill Orchestra, "Loch Lomond," *Columbia*, 1937.
[98] Ibid.

naturally.'"[99] Though this article glorified the progress of racial equality based off of the power of white male bandleaders (McMillan Jr. later attributes Sullivan's success to the fact that "Claude, a leading white bandleader, had the courage to hire a black girl vocalist"), it also calls on a history of Sullivan's presence because of the renewed interest in her comeback tours.[100] Sullivan's interpretations of "traditional" songs from the 1930s and 1940s can act as a window to challenge notions of race and musical authenticity in jazz music and history. Sullivan's performances mobilized a history of her presence on 52nd Street and on tours and radio shows that spread her music around the country decades earlier.

In her comeback tours, Sullivan tried to invoke nostalgia that was "accessible, inclusive, distinctively democratic, and…distinctively American" through her emphasis on telling stories and through affect.[101] Sullivan said, "At this particular time, I'm busy digging up songs that were popular in the 30s and 40s because I think that was a very good era. That's the Swing Era. I really look for lyrics. The lyrics are very important because basically you're telling a story…You know, I like to pick a song I can feel."[102] As argued in Chapter 2, singers sometimes emphasized their roles as storytellers and interpreters of lyrics in order to promote an image of authenticity. Here, Sullivan projects her role as storyteller as one who can recall memories of the 1930s and 40s, what she terms "a very good era." The Swing Era was symbolic in its ability to connect people across race, ethnicity, class, and region, and it reflected unity through initiatives of the New Deal like organized labor coalitions and through the Popular Front, which emphasized

[99] Lewis K. McMillan, Jr., "Maxine Sullivan: Little Miss Loch Lomond," *The Sunday Tablet*, Aug. 29, 1971.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 13.
[102] Sullivan, *Love To Be In Love*.

utopian ideals.[103] Further, the popularity of swing music in the 1930s forced America to acknowledge that jazz music emerged from African American culture and from a group of people who had been continually discriminated against in America.[104] When Sullivan vocalizes her intention to invoke stories and messages from the Swing Era, she opens up a space for audiences to feel and connect to a history of American music based on African American culture. She also projects a possibility of coalition across race, ethnicity, and class to promote a "distinctively American" image.

In international performances such as the one in Japan, Sullivan presents audiences with ways to connect to American music histories while also emulating inclusiveness through her performance techniques and narration. For example, Sullivan improvises during instrumental sections, saying "all right" encouragingly, and echoing "yeah" and "I hear ya" to accompany the guitar solo in the group.[105] This kind of improvisation and call-and-response set up a group and audience dynamic that is interactive and rooted in African American music techniques. Sullivan also gives audiences ways to connect to American music history with an emphasis on African American musicians' histories. For instance, she then introduces the next song by saying, "Right now I'm going to do another song from the Cotton Club Days, 'I've Got a Right to Sing the Blues.'"[106] This narration to accompany her music invokes an image of the Cotton Club, which was a whites-only club that featured African American musicians for entertainment. By making this comment and by singing about the blues, Sullivan conveys this history to jazz fans. She also performed songs that she recorded in Japan, dedicated them to Takao Ishizuka, her producer and

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[103] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 14.
[104] Ibid.
[105] Maxine Sullivan with the Scott Hamilton Quintet. Fujitsu Concord Jazz Festival, Kan-i Hoken Hall, Tokyo, Japan. September 28, 1986. All Art Promotion MCMLXXXVII. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PcgRkH8r76w
[106] Ibid.

promoter in Japan. Here, she links African American musicians and Japanese producers together and presented them as allies in jazz music-making. At another point, she sings "Georgia on My Mind" after a request and says that "from what I understand [the song] is quite a favorite here [in Japan]."[107] She not only plays to audience interests in Japan, but by performing "Georgia on My Mind," she helps to construct images of the South and connects to African American musicians who have covered the song over time, like Ray Charles.

While Sullivan sometimes expressed the challenges of performing to a younger audience in interviews, she pursued nostalgic performances based on her repertoire from the 1930s and 1940s, not through performing more contemporary popular songs. She owned her strengths and her craft by performing songs from her early career; nonetheless, she was sometimes nervous about appealing to a younger audience. Sullivan said in an interview, "Don't think I don't have a little trepidation when I walk into a club…except for a few old-timers, I'm working on a brand new audience who've never heard of Maxine Sullivan."[108] Sullivan expressed a sense of nervousness about her reception by younger audiences, showing she felt she would have to assert her relevance and talent; her reputation would not carry her with a younger audience. In 1969 she said, "My repertoire goes back to the 30s and 40s. I get requests for the older ones, the ones you don't hear every day. Anyway, it's a waste of time for me to get involved in songs that are here today and gone tomorrow."[109] Sullivan thus marketed herself here as enduring and not a popular fad through her song choice. She presented her songs as staples of the American past, and used

[107] Ibid.
[108] Cliff Smith, "Maxine Sullivan Raises Daughter, Returns to Singing Career at 58," *The Times-Union*, Rochester, N.Y., Oct. 1, 1969. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[109] Ibid.

these songs in attempts to connect to younger audiences. When she did so, she created an idealized past for younger audiences who did not experience the Swing Era.

In performances, Sullivan minimized the movements of her body, drawing attention to and placing emphasis on her voice and the music. In her "comeback" later performances, she typically did not move around a lot on stage. When she minimized her movements, she deemphasized her own body. This makes the audience focus more on the sounds and music—less on the showiness of the performer, which was in stark contrast to the 4 Girls 4 singers, who frequently used bodily movements, expressive mannerisms, and extravagant costumes during their performances, creating a spectacle of themselves.

Other musicians sometimes tried to express why Sullivan's singing style was so impactful, showing the power of Sullivan's voice and performance techniques. As Scott Hamilton said in *Love to Be in Love*: "They don't have singers like Maxine anymore, or certainly very few. She did sing straight, although that's a much more difficult thing to do than most people realize. And she didn't exactly sing straight. If she'd sung straight, it would have been monotonous and awful. She sang simply. And she did it with...an uncanny sense of rhythm. I mean, you know, rhythmically so perfect."[110] When Hamilton used the phrase "singing straight," he meant that Sullivan stuck largely to the melodies of how tunes were originally written. But then he retracted his statement to say that "she sang simply," instead focusing on her interpretation. Indeed, saying that she sang "straight" could be a negative assessment in the context of jazz. (Billie Holiday famously said, "I hate straight singing. I have to change a tune to my own way of doing it. That's all I know.") It is Sullivan's acute rhythmic abilities that allow depth to be added to her vocal performances. As Margaret Moos Pick put it, "This combination

[110] Sullivan, *Love To Be In Love*.

of old melodies and new rhythms became Maxine Sullivan's trademark. Maxine's interpretation, with her lilting voice and precise enunciation, sounded very different from anyone else in jazz at that time."[111]

Reviewers frequently commented on Sullivan's voice as key to her success; as her voice shifted over time, some critics described her performances as going from "cool" to "warm." Dan Morgenstern, director of the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University and who had memories of Sullivan, said, "Maxine had a very pure, sweet voice, and she had a nice time sense, but she wasn't very theatrical."[112] Morgenstern recalled Sullivan's voice in a gendered way, describing it as "pure" and girl-ish. He also pointed to her sense of rhythm as being an asset, but alludes to her lack of theatricality as being a drawback. As Burke noted, Sullivan's performances contrasted with other African American performers of her time period for this very reason, as her took on so-called "high art."[113] During her comeback tours, some critics described how her voice had shifted to include increased affective capacity. A review in *High Fidelity* from November 1968 described a recording of Bob Wilber: The Music of Hoagy Carmichael: "Maxine Sullivan is also present, singing with an intimate warmth made even more directly communicative by the huskiness that now tinges her once crystal-cool voice."[114] This review emphasized Sullivan having more emotional depth with age while also alluding to temperature and therefore feeling. This demonstrates the powerful impact her later recordings had through her interpretation and vocal techniques—even in her older age.

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[111] Margaret Moos Pick, *Riverwalk Jazz Script*, The Jim Cullum Riverwalk Jazz Collection, Stanford Archive of Recorded Sound, Stanford, CA.
[112] Bernice Yeung, "Step Into the Attic. Enter the Jazz Age," *The New York Times*, Jan. 27, 2007.
[113] Burke, *Come In and Hear the Truth*, 90.
[114] Morgan Ames, R.D. Darrell, John Gabree, Gene Lees, and John S. Wilson, "The Lighter Side," *High Fidelity*, Nov. 1969.

Sullivan's calm personality and toned-down attitude was appreciated by jazz scholars and musicians, and she was seen as a desirable singer because of her ability to let others shine. Morgenstern said, "One thing about Maxine was that her personality was very compatible with jazz musicians, because unlike some singers, she didn't demand a lot of attention and she didn't elbow the musicians out of the way. She looked at herself as one of them. She didn't put on any airs."[115] In contrast to the girl-singer-as-diva, Morgenstern presents Sullivan as subtle and compatible with instrumentalists. Through her performance gestures, attitude, and abilities, Sullivan was respected by other musicians as she fulfilled her duty as vocalist, a position that was often criticized by musicians.[116]

Sullivan's bodily movements on stage became inclusive of all audience members through the ways in which she slowly turns to reach each person in the room. This specific performance movement can be seen in both performance footage and was recognized by fellow musicians. Tenor saxophone player Scott Hamilton noticed the effect that this had on the audience: "Maxine, really, she really understood what it was to sing to an audience. You know, she had a style where she could sing to everybody in the room at once by kind of half-revolving, in a little semi-circle all night long, like this, very slowly, you know, and smiling…but it worked…it was beautiful. She got to the entire place," said Hamilton.[117] Hamilton articulated a performance gesture of Sullivan's that was noticed by the musicians with whom she performed. The audience, too, likely felt included through Sullivan's subtle bodily gestures. The ability to connect with an entire room represented how she reached various audiences.

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[115] Yeung, "Step Into the Attic. Enter the Jazz Age."
[116] See Pellegrinelli, "The Song is Who?: Locating Singers on the Jazz Scene."
[117] Sullivan, *Love To Be in Love*.

Sullivan advocated for jazz as a significant "American" contribution to art, drawing on claims of a distinctly American identity and asserting herself as a key player within that history. In a 1975 newspaper article, William Allan gave an account of Sullivan's enthusiastic statement: "'Jazz isn't coming back, it's back!' she adds. 'It's never been commercial, and I don't think it ever will be. But it is our music, America's contribution.'"[118] Sullivan presented jazz as both enduring and artistic, seeking to distance her art form from being seen simply as money-making popular music. When she said "our music," she sought to place herself and her jazz contributions within both the artistic sphere and within the nation. In addition, she advocated for increased funding for jazz music based on national identity. Sullivan said, "Some of us checked, and about 85 per cent of the funds from the National Endowment for the Arts is going to classical music, Europe's music, which gets about seven per cent participation here in America. So we're going to fight to have some of that money go for jazz, American music."[119] Sullivan also connected her artistic work to activist causes, insisting on jazz as a crucial component of American identity that should be supported financially. By setting up jazz in contrast to classical music, she gestures towards class differences that recognize classical music as "highbrow" and jazz music as "between highbrow and lowbrow culture," or "on the median."[120] She again draws from egalitarian ideals of swing, especially when she points out the disproportionate funding of classical music (85%) to its participation (7%). When she assigns classical music to Europe's culture and history, she points to its recognition as high art that is supported by an American institution (the NEA) and argues that jazz should be recognized and supported as the music of the American people and nation.

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[118] William Allan, "Maxine Sullivan Numbers Recollections," *The Pittsburg Press*, Apr. 16, 1975. 16. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Stowe, *Swing Changes*, 27.

Sullivan also drew upon a national identity to stake a claim to jazz music while also alluding to histories of race in America. Sullivan traveled extensively with her tours throughout her careers. A 1976 article reported Sullivan's understanding of her European tour: "We were just over in Sweden doing a concert…and American performers are so highly thought of there. There are jazz musicians in Europe, but they don't have the same feel for the music that Americans do. That's because we're born to it, I guess."[121] When Sullivan insists on the importance of American identity in jazz music, she also draws on histories of race in America. These histories included the struggles of African Americans that served as the foundation for jazz and asserted their part in it. Further, when she draws upon an "American" identity, she also sets Sweden up in contrast to American because it has a predominantly white Nordic population. She frames the "feel" for jazz music as distinctly American and places her and her band as central to this tradition. Sullivan's performances diversified narratives in jazz history by challenging notions of musical and racial authenticity while advocating for "American" music and its importance as a recognized art form.

Narrating Age, Retirement, and Labor

Sullivan utilized aging to pursue new experiences beyond singing. For instance, Sullivan picked up the flugelhorn and also appeared in a play about aging titled "My Old Friends." She cultivated an image of respect and wisdom through music performances while also shifting her vocal style and tone to fit with her image in older age as both genuine and sophisticated. Her allusions to racism in her life and career also shed light on the kinds of labor that she performed.

[121] "Big Band Sound Hasn't Lost Its Appeal of a Generation Ago," *Worcester Sunday Telegram,* Aug. 8, 1976. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

When Sullivan did not exclusively pursue music in older age, she showed the kinds of labor that enabled, promoted, and paused her career in jazz singing as a female African American vocalist.

Both newspapers and Sullivan herself described the aging process in relation to her performances to promote an image of wisdom and experience. Richard H. Shepard of *The New York Times* wrote about Sullivan and others appearing in a play by setting up perceptions of performers in older age: "There's a prevailing sentiment, it sometimes seems, that old age is some sort of an unmentionable disease whose sufferers must be called senior citizens, when they are actually graduate students of life, and are going through their golden age."[122] Shepard highlighted audience (and society's) perception of older age before asserting the wisdom and resilience of aging performers.

Critics described Sullivan's style on her comeback tours as containing depth and lacking showiness in ways that supported sophisticated music and artistry. One 1969 *Monmouth Evergreen Record* "Saturday Review" read:

> Maxine Sullivan is one of those increasingly rare singers whose voice and personality are always at the service of the song, rather than vice versa. Most of the material in this collection is very good indeed, and her interpretations concede that songwriters—as well as performers—sometimes have something interesting to say. The concession in no way detracts from her unaffected artistry, which has merely mellowed with the years, and the fact that reasonably intelligent lyrics are intelligibly delivered seems a positive gain.[123]

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[122] Richard F. Shepard, "Aging Joys and Pangs Reprised In 'My Old Friends' at La Mama," *The New York Times*, Dec. 1978. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

[123] "Saturday Review: Recording Reports Jazz LPs," *Monmouth Evergreen Records,* Nov. 15. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

In this review, Sullivan's artistic qualities are responsible for enhancing the song's content, which is an exceptional attribute. Over time, Sullivan's ability to act as an interpreter for the songs' content had increased. For this reviewer, that quality strengthens jazz's reputation as an important art form.

Sullivan narrated her "retirement" as a function of exhaustion, while also pointing to the impact of racism on her career. In an interview, she said, "I was just running from coast to coast doing one night stands without the benefit advanced publicity which the radio had done for me. So, in 1957 I just got tired of fighting against the gaff, you know, like walking uphill with the breaks. So I was out of it for about 12 years."[124] In the late 1950s, television is becoming more popular, changing the way that singers were marketed and promoted. Due to the racism in the industry, not many black performers were on television. The challenging circumstances made her tired—something she could vocalize in the post-civil rights era.

Sullivan also described her departure from show business as a choice to take care of her daughter—an important choice for a working black woman during the 1950s. An article in *The Times-Union* by Cliff Smith titled "Maxine Sullivan Raises Daughter, Returns to Singing Career at 58," showed Sullivan's framing of her story: "I decided that when my daughter, Paula, left elementary school and went into junior high school that my place was at home."[125] Sullivan notes the particularly vulnerable teenage years of her daughter and conveys her active decision to be in the home. In a time when black women were frequently domestic servants and taking care of white women's children, Sullivan making the active choice to leave work to parent her daughter was an important decision. It is only after her daughter graduated from Albert Einstein Medical Center as a nurse that she returns to show business.

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[124] Sullivan, *Love To Be in Love*.
[125] Smith, "Maxine Sullivan Raises Daughter, Returns to Singing Career at 58."

Sullivan was sometimes elusive when it came to the reasons why she retired at an early age, particularly in interviews. In doing so, she resisted dominant narratives about retired singers that they cannot find work and become outdated, and instead established a flexible space for her to explore various paths important to her. As Will Friedwald brings up in his biographical account of Sullivan's retirement: "…she barely sang at all again until 1968. Whenever I spoke with her, she was never quite clear: Did she want to keep singing and had no opportunities, or did she just want to leave music behind for a while? It's hard to believe that impresarios like George Wein and Norman Granz wouldn't have come up with work for her had she approached them."[126] Friedwald points to the fact that Sullivan did not give straightforward reasons for her departure from performing, but instead chose to engage in other activities. Friedwald continued, "Whatever the case, Sullivan spend a dozen years focusing on family, especially her daughter (then in her "difficult years," she said), as well as on community service and a subsequent career as a registered nurse. In fact, her major musical preoccupation in those years didn't involve singing at all; instead, she taught herself how to play the valve trombone."[127] Sullivan prioritized family (perhaps admitting this clearly could have led her to be seen as a less dedicated musician), but also pursued other humanitarian work to support others in health and community. Her actions speak to her values, but she also did not stray entirely from music. In teaching herself to play the valve trombone (an instrument usually associated with male musicians), she took up her passions and diversified her strengths as a musician. By eliding the reasons for retirement, she resisted judgments of being less dedicated to her craft.

Some black magazines such as *Ebony* covered Sullivan's story by framing it as an important "comeback" that focused on resilience. In doing so, they focus on her age and her

[126] Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*, 462-463.
[127] Ibid., 463.

success, showing how it is possible to return with force to the music scene, even in older age. An article titled "What Happened to…Maxine Sullivan" in a 1974 issue of *Ebony* wrote:

> Today, some 37 years after reaching national prominence and after 17 years of retirement from show business, the 63-year-old singer is finding herself back in demand. In April, she appeared at Blues Alley, a night club in Washington, D.C. In May, she teamed with jazz great Sy Oliver at Carnegie Hall in New York. This month, she plans to give her first performance in France. And in October, she is scheduled to go on an extended tour of Great Britain with what is billed as "The World's Greatest Jazz Band."[128]

By using numbers—including the time that was height of her popularity, the amount of time she had been out of show business, and her age—the article focuses on the feat that Sullivan has overcome in returning to singing. Then, by listing the extensive tour line-up, it shows her future success.

Sullivan narrated the past in ways that showed her awareness of nostalgia's power while also painting a more realistic picture of her labor and career opportunities as an African American woman in the 1930s. A 1983 article by George W. Goodman described Sullivan's perception of the 1930s that "those days seemed rosier with the passing of time."[129] Sullivan recalled, "After you have lived through it all, and go back over it, you can laugh at things that weren't funny at all during the experience…I can remember having to advance money from my earnings to pay bridge tolls for our band. I remember having to buy food from some of the friends I worked with. But if we hadn't been musicians a lot of us would have been working as

[128] *Ebony*, Vol. 29, No. 9, 1974. 138.
[129] George W. Goodman, "Jazz Fest: Bittersweet Memories of the 1930's," *The New York Times*. Jul. 3, 1983.

domestics and hardly doing better."[130] Sullivan described the monetary hardships of touring on the road after the Great Depression. When she refers to "domestics," she draws attention to one of the only jobs available to African American women during this time. In both cases, she expressed the idea that there were limited options for African American women and that there were many hardships that are erased through the power of nostalgia. As David Meltzer has argued, nostalgia can be understood as "a revisionary act, emptying history of depth and texture."[131] In this context, while the nostalgia invoked through the music makes experiences seem "rosier" over time—fonder and not as bleak—Sullivan's reflections of the realities of the 1930s adds back a dimension of depth. She points to the economic challenges of being an African American woman and trying to sustain her career.

Some newspaper articles also emphasized the significance of Sullivan's labor as multidimensional, drawing attention to women's work. An article by Anne Crutcher in *The Washington Daily News* reported, "…there's more to Maxine Sullivan than the singer. The personality behind the voice also encompasses a frustrated tap dancer, a conscientious mother, a diligent and effective civic worker, and a creative seamstress."[132] By stating Sullivan's diverse work experiences, Crutcher promotes the significance of Sullivan's unrecognized labor and shows the importance of women's work behind-the-scenes. Another jazz critic, Wilma Dobie, wrote an entire article dedicated to Sullivan's sewing labor: "During her three-week engagement, Miss Sullivan stepped into the spotlight in five striking evening gowns she had sewed herself specially for the big event. For the basic sheath pattern she had chosen, two yards of material

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[130] Ibid.
[131] David Meltzer, ed., *Reading Jazz* (New York: Mercury House, 1993), 34.
[132] Anne Crutcher, "Maxine Sullivan: Down-to-earth immortal," *The Washington Daily News*. Nov. 11, 1970. 36. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.

proved sufficient for each. By varying neckline, trim and material, they were distinctively different."[133] Dobie described Sullivan's contributions to her performance through her wardrobe. She also detailed the specific fabric, materials, and low-cost before quoting the enthusiastic Sullivan: "You can't beat that for a bargain!...You bet I'm a sew-it-yourself fan."[134]

Dobie also pointed out Sullivan's thrift in both her past and present career, showing the monetary challenges that some female singers faced during their careers. She said, "One memorable gown was a frothy organdy she ran off during the early, lean Pittsburgh days. 'It started off white,' Maxine recalls, 'then I went home and tinted it pink. The next time it was dark red, and I finally wound up with a beautiful shade of gray. I got a lot of mileage out of that dress!'"[135] This anecdote points to the expectation that women singers were supposed to always appear in different and glamorous attire while also describing the challenges that women faced in making low-cost, acceptable clothing for their stage performances. Dobie also pointed to Sullivan's frugality, which was a necessity during her early career but a choice later on: "The dresses had been run up on the same portable sewing machine she had bought with her first pay check from the famous Onyx Club where she made her initial New York appearance in 1937."[136] From early in her career, Sullivan knew the importance of attire for singers. By pointing to this element of Sullivan's labor (sewing), Dobie highlights the monetary challenges of singers in the 1930s, especially for women of color, but also shows the crafty ways Sullivan navigated hardships in her career.

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[133] Wilma Dobie, "Sew Along, Sing Along with Maxine Sullivan." *Tuesday Magazine*, Nov. 1967. Vertical Subject Files Collection, Rutgers Institute for Jazz Studies, Newark, NJ.
[134] Ibid.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.

Sullivan's labor in older age also came through learning a new instrument that was typically associated with male instrumentalists: the flugelhorn. Sullivan said, "I first decided I was gonna play a horn about ten years ago. My last engagement before I retired was in Honolulu. I saw a young girl who sang and blew a trumpet. Let's face it. After you've done three or four songs, if you want to stay up there longer you've got to do something else."[137] Sullivan notes a girl playing an instrument as an inspiration for varying her performance routine with instruments. In a sense, Sullivan saw it as more acceptable to play a horn after seeing another female play. She also narrated her choices of the fluegelhorn as being a practical one that fit her tiny size, performance style, and personality: "I didn't want to play the slide trombone because that's too much like a circus act. And the trumpet seemed to be too hard. I thought of hitting those high notes and my eyes popping out."[138] Sullivan showed that older performers could indeed learn new instruments and a new craft. Though Sullivan was critiqued for her playing of the fluegelhorn, she continued to do so: "I also played the horn at a jazz festival in Long Island. But John Wilson of the New York *Times* caught me and said he wished I would stick to singing. That was not too happy."[139] Sullivan pursued the fluegelhorn for fun and leisure, and when jazz critics saw these performances they sometimes did not review them favorably. Going against critics' assessments and judgments, Sullivan challenge gendered understandings of music performance and highlighted the labor of learning a new instrument, especially in older age.

Sullivan placed herself in a larger community of aging performers, showing a significant way in which aging women's labor could be recognized by the public. She said, "I believe that there has been somewhat of a renaissance in jazz. There are quite a few of us left and those of us

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[137] Arnold Shaw, *The Street That Never Slept: New York's Fabled 52d St*. (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1971), 102.
[138] Ibid., 102-103.
[139] Ibid., 103.

that are left are doing that last thing."[140] She draws attention to the resurgence in jazz music and says that the older generation of jazz musicians is actively participating in the scene. She alluded to the fact that though some people may believe that these jazz singers have passed, she pointed to the fact that many remain and continued to work in older age.

At the same time Sullivan asserted her presence in the jazz resurgence, she also stated that she prioritized her community work, and she illustrated the challenges of balancing commitment to community and singing. This demonstration voiced a dedication to community over individual fame in show business. She said, "I try to sing in between my work and my community activities. But I'm doing a lot of gigs at present—more than I had planned. My major thrust is in my community work, but I'm getting so much work singing that I'm going to have to give up one or the other."[141] Sullivan emphasized that show business can be stressful, and she does not want it to take over her life: "I really don't want to get *that* involved in show business. As long as I can do a few weekends. I'm perfectly happy. I don't want to get into it where that's the only thing I do. I've come this far without an ulcer and I'm not looking forward to getting one now."[142] Sullivan drew attention to the challenges of being a working woman in older age while also emphasizing her desire to perform for leisure. In 1976, Sullivan said,

> I'm still sort of half in and half out, I don't take this business seriously anymore. Unless you're really up on top, it's very difficult in the middle. I don't think what I'm doing is that commercial, I prefer not to get into the commercial aspect, because it wears you out. You're in a race. Who's on top? Who cares! I enjoy working with the musicians and have

[140] *Ebony*, 138.
[141] Ibid.
[142] Ibid.

a ball. If I'm not out there singing, I'm at home knocking myself out working on The House That Jazz Built. I feel pretty satisfied with myself, I'm having fun.[143]

Sullivan emphasized the aggressive competition in show business while separating herself from commercial priorities. In addition, she shed light on her past labor and her want for leisure and pleasure through her singing in the present. She narrated herself as being a multidimensional person who did not want the stresses or the life-takeover of show business. This is something made possible in her older age and with her former success. Sullivan's comments drew attention to the competitive commercial culture of the music industry, even for older singers, and voices her commitment to community and enjoyment.

Similar to 4 Girls 4, Sullivan narrated the changes in her repertoire that contrast with popular perception that she only sings folk songs, showing the labor of cultivating nostalgia. The *Ebony* article said, "Miss Sullivan's act features the same songs she was doing 30 years ago, including *Loch Lomond, Molly Malone* and *If I had a Ribbon Bow*."[144] The article gestures toward a sense of nostalgia through these old folk tunes, but then includes a response from Sullivan: "But I'm not doing all folk songs. Most of the songs I do are actually World War II songs and I do some things from the old Cotton Club."[145] Here, Sullivan actively diversified her repertoire in order to incorporate more diverse songs from a little bit later on in her career. By adding other songs from the past and from different stages in her career, Sullivan highlighted her versatility and tapped into a famous location ("the old Cotton Club") and a well-known time (World War II) in jazz music. Sullivan's comments showed the labor behind cultivating a set list of tunes that would be recognized and appreciated by broad audiences.

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[143] "A Talk with Maxine Sullivan," Taken and transcribed by Bob Rusch. *Cadence*, Sep. 1976. 4.
[144] *Ebony*. 138.
[145] Ibid.

It was also significant that Sullivan played mostly with band members who were several generations younger than her; this contrast in age on stage served to promote the significance of Sullivan's past and present performances. As Friedwald pointed out, "Hyman and Wilber were the first of many new collaborators for Sullivan, who, in this phase of her career, were generally at least a few generations younger than she."[146] This generational gap was quite visible on stage. For example, in the 1985 tour with Scott Hamilton, the men on stage are decades younger than her. This contrast allowed for her position on stage to be a highly revered one, as the juxtaposition served to portray her as older, wiser, and experienced while still presenting her as relevant.

Sullivan was an inspiration for young singers and musicians such as Ella Fitzgerald, and she was an important leader in her Bronx community. Though Sullivan did not perform much jazz in the 1950s, she did not ever retire a second time, and she continued to work until her death in 1987. She also served as a chair of her local school board and opened a community center for neighborhood youth called The House That Jazz Built. In 2015, Bronx street Ritter Place was named Maxine Sullivan Way to honor all that she has done for the community. Musicians, educators, and community members are now trying to turn Sullivan's house into a cultural center to honor her memory, and ensure that her presence, labor, and legacy remain.[147]

Conclusion

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[146] Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to the Great Jazz and Pop Singers*, 463.
[147] Mark Naison and Ed Garcia Conde, "Fordham University Professor Wants to Turn Home of Late Jazz Legend, Maxine Sullivan Into A Cultural Center." Welcome2TheBronx™ . October 12, 2015. Accessed December 21, 2017. http://www.welcome2thebronx.com/wordpress/2015/10/12/fordham-university-professor-wants-to-turn-home-of-late-jazz-legend-maxine-sullivan-into-a-cultural-center/.

Through their nostalgia tours, women singers of big bands provided audiences with ways to feel the past while also performing age in meaningful ways. These performances of age critiqued norms of gender, race, and sexuality that were present during the swing era while confronting audiences with the realities of aging women's bodies. Singers' performances also affirmed the importance of working womanhood in older age, unveiling the labor behind images of glamour and leisure,[148] the possibilities and challenges of creating nostalgia through an aging voice and body, and embodying specific notions of the past and present to make themselves marketable to audiences. The singers in 4 Girls 4 presented largely white upper and middle class audiences with memories of postwar glamour and femininity that relied on a largely white style of big band jazz. Sullivan invoked images of a 1930s America that was diverse and democratic, while subtly pointing to the challenges of being an African American female singer. Both 4 Girls 4 and Maxine Sullivan asserted the importance of their labor in older age while mobilizing various kinds of nostalgia to connect with their audiences.

[148] See Tucker, *Swing Shift*.

Conclusion

After World War II, drastic changes in the world of swing included shifts in gender relations, entertainment, and musical culture. After the war, an influx of GIs returned to their jobs, including their positions in big bands. As Sherrie Tucker points out, after the war, "Door receipts no longer covered the expenses of most big bands. As the size of bands dropped, unemployment among musicians rose."[1] When venues like ballrooms, which had provided a place for the performances of women singers in big bands, closed down, singers were channeled into different venues, such as night clubs and performance theaters. At the same time, big bands became smaller and employed fewer musicians, especially due to the costs of sustaining big bands. However, women singers could maneuver the postwar music industry differently from women instrumentalists, who were more frequently displaced by men returning to big bands. Singers marketed themselves to reflect the economic changes of the era, shifting styles and band types, some drawing on their popularity and skills to make it, and others fading among the increasing competition.

This dissertation examined how the performances women singers of big bands were valuable sites for the negotiation of identity. This project expands the notion of the jazz archive to account for such practices as singers' performance strategies, especially in how they adhered to or contested societal norms and how they projected various markers of their identities. These different dimensions of performance helped to shape big band culture and history; they also served as ways to navigate shifting industry standards and expectations. This study has

[1] Tucker, *Swing Shift*, 319.

challenged the one-dimensional "girl singer" stereotype to demonstrate diverse performances of race, gender, class, and sexuality that women embodied and projected in their careers.

In each chapter, I showed how stories of these women were crafted by multiple sources, as well as how singers challenged these stories through various performances both on and off the stage. The performances of the singers in this study illustrate the many strategies they used to traverse the music industry, as well as how they responded to mechanisms that reduced their stories and marginalized their lives. While women like Helen Humes, Thelma Carpenter, Louis Tobin, Kay Starr, and Helen Forrest were often at the whim of the media and predominantly white male jazz critics in how their careers, music, and lives were represented on the page, these women used spaces such as interviews, their own writing, and performances to present alternatives to these male-dominated narratives. These performances sometimes included embedded critiques of societal norms pertaining to race, gender, sexuality, and class during the 1930s to 1950s. At other times, these singers conformed to and confirmed dominant values in order to pursue career success. Their stories show how easily-dismissed "girl singers" shaped big band music and culture. These singers become more central in the larger stories of jazz history when taking into account the many dimensions of their performances.

Women singers constantly positioned themselves in relation to jazz music as rooted in African American culture, and often grappled with the black-white binary that had been set up in dominant discourse. For example, Kay Starr spoke of herself as both within blues lineages and distant from them, at times advocating for her Native identity as a connection to the blues and at other times performing working-class whiteness in her music and image. Helen Forrest, in contrast, defined her music often in contrast to African American culture, as shown through her descriptions of differences between her and Billie Holiday's careers. In many ways, she

marketed herself by performing whiteness through her image and sound. She also sought to align herself with other Jewish musicians, some of whom had positioned themselves in relation to African American culture as well. Singers like Helen Humes and Thelma Carpenter drew upon African American community networks and performance venues in order to see success in their careers. The ways that singers navigated the black/white binary in jazz music is important because the binary had significant force in dictating women's careers, opportunities, and authenticity.

Women singers also contested traditional genres of jazz, blues, and popular music, both within big band performances and in other performances throughout their careers. Critics often struggled to categorize these women and their music, but were quite invested in doing so. In eliding particular categories, singers drew attention to the construction of those categories. Maxine Sullivan staked a claim to "American music" by swinging classic Scottish folk tunes despite pushback. Kay Starr negotiated her success through various genres of music, including jazz, blues, country, and rock n' roll, at many times, combining influences from these different genres in a single song. The singers of 4 Girls 4 drew upon variety show format to showcase individual performances while coming together to show "age on stage" in their later years. The scope of songs and styles played demonstrated the versatility of these singers and how they utilized the tools available—especially through their voice/sound, looks, and reputation—to survive music industry shifts.

The performances of women singers also challenged acceptable expressions of womanhood, and at times, also brought private issues into the public. This presentation of taboo expressions of sexuality, the challenges of women's bodies performing in older age, and the attention drawn to women's labor of performance had the potential to affect the audiences'

understandings of the complex experiences of women singers. These performances and presentations of less-visible issues challenge the male-dominant stories crafted into big band history. Women's performances of big band music through nostalgia tours also acted as a valuable site to see the ways in which age intersected with earlier expectations of "girl singers." The performances enacted by these singers could invoke nostalgia while also pointing to new possibilities of understanding women singers' music in the present.

The end of the Swing Era did not mean the end of these women's careers. The shifts in the music industry in the 1950s and 1960s detailed in chapter two are also important in how women singers changed styles to stay relevant. Frequently, singers marketed themselves to be desirable according to changes in popular music. As job opportunities for women singers in big bands declined rapidly with the demise of big band profit and new types of music, some singers shifted their styles to engage in rock n' roll or country. Other women continued to pursue pop music or jazz music through different band formations or solo careers. Tucker found, "Many women musicians who played in the 1940s were able to maintain their careers throughout the 1950s and 1960s—in combos, as singles, on television, in cocktail lounges, as music teachers, as church musicians—whether they married and had babies or not."[2] Women musicians found space to pursue music through alternatives to the big band. In addition, for white women in particular, their popularity enabled them to crossover into television and movies, which were growing industries in entertainment.[3] For instance, Rosemary Clooney appeared in feature films with Bing Crosby including *The Stars Are Singing* (1953) and *White Christmas* (1954). Women singers took a number of approaches to their careers as the job market and entertainment industry

[2] Ibid., 322.
[3] Ibid.

shifted, negotiating and utilizing the skills they developed through their experiences with big bands.

After their careers with big bands, some women took breaks from their singing to pursue traditional gender roles, getting married and becoming mothers. However, during these periods of career hiatus, some singers had difficulty surviving financially after their height of their careers. The postwar era also generated increasing pressure for women to perform traditional gender roles. Tucker articulates, "Americans were urged to create domestic security through marriage, children, and the home."[4] She also points out that childcare could be very hard for working mothers to obtain, and there was a great stigma attached to working mothers that equated them with negligence and irresponsibility.[5] Women singers felt pressure to fit into these traditional gender roles. Chapter four described Helen O'Connell's struggles with her divorce and career, and chapter three detailed Kay Starr's grapplings with working motherhood. Women singers were also often dealing with marriages and divorces, as well as their private life being highly publicized because of their position as celebrities. In some of their interviews, singers chose to point to the challenges of raising a family while having a career, publicly commenting on the challenges of working women's labor. These histories of the many facets of women's labor are significant because they uncover the work behind women's performances of glamour—ones that are most familiar to the public.

The diverse histories of women singers and how they enacted racial and ethnic identities is important for understanding jazz's history in light of recent "neo-swing" subcultures that promote white-washed histories of jazz. In addition to the nostalgia tours that flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, the 1990s saw heightened popularity of "neo-swing," which spread swing

[4] Ibid., 318.
[5] Ibid., 321.

music and swing dance culture to different regions of the country. Eric Martin Usner has shown how Southern California youth embraced neo-swing as a subcultural practice that drew from 1930s and 1940s American popular music and dance styles.[6] He argues that "The swing era as depicted in its contemporary popular culture is one largely peopled by whites."[7] Being predominantly focused on whites, the performative histories of swing reconstructed through neo-swing in Usner's study serve to forget the "blackness of 'American' culture."[8] When popular memory constructs, distorts, and erases the past, it becomes increasingly important to show the contributions and stories of women of color who navigated and shaped these histories. Remembering their presence is evermore central when erasure threatens people's histories.

At the start of my research, I found that women singers of big bands frequently surfaced in magazines and newspapers through large, glamorous photographs. The photographs often included brief captions or just names without other context or stories about the singers and their careers. Often, women singers' photographs were placed in juxtaposition to "more serious" big band news about male bandleaders, their lives, and their careers. This style of understanding girl singers' roles in big band histories was also reproduced in jazz histories such as George T. Simon's book *The Big Bands*. By placing the women's photographs side-by-side on two full pages, with just captions of their names along with the male bandleaders' names (i.e., "Barnet and Venuti's Kay Starr"), frames these women as possessions of the men under whom they labored. Often, more detailed stories of these singers would not surface until their gained solo fame or had longer careers. Their glamorous images endured, though, minimalizing women's stories and contributions by focusing on looks over music.

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[6] Eric Martin Usner, "Dancing in the Past, Living in the Present: Nostalgia and Race in Southern California Neo-swing Dance Culture." *Dance Research Journal* 33, no. 2 (2001): 89.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 99.

During the course of this project, some of the women in this study passed away, including Kay Starr on November 3, 2016, and Rose Marie on December 28, 2017. Obituaries of these singers have been important sites of remembrance of their music and contributions, and they act as an important source for the jazz archive. I think it is important to fill in the gaps about these women's lives and their stories because their performances show us how they wanted to be remembered, and how they expressed agency in presenting certain versions of themselves and their music to the world. While obituaries can reflect the values of a particular era, drawing from the highlights of singers' careers, they do not account for the whole story of these women's lives. Zooming in to the sometimes contradictory, sometimes fraught and challenging histories of women singers of big bands, we can see a complex picture of their lives that shows their versatility and musical contributions.

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